POPPY Z. BRITE
SELECTED STORIES
INDEPENDENT LEGIONS PUBLISHING

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CALCUTTA, LORD OF NERVES

I was born in a north Calcutta hospital in the heart of an Indian midnight just before the beginning of the monsoon season. The air hung heavy as wet velvet over the Hooghly River, offshoot of the holy Ganga, and the stumps of banyan trees on the Upper Chitpur Road were flecked with dots of phosphorous like the ghosts of flames. I was as dark as the new moon in the sky, and I cried very little. I feel as if I remember this, because this is the way it must have been.

My mother died in labor, and later that night the hospital burned to the ground. (I have no reason to connect the two incidents; then again, I have no reason not to. Perhaps a desire to live burned on in my mother's heart. Perhaps the flames were fanned by her hatred for me, the insignificant mewling infant that had killed her.) A nurse carried me out of the roaring husk of the building and laid me in my father's arms. He cradled me, numb with grief.

My father was American. He had come to Calcutta five years earlier, on business. There he had fallen in love with my mother and, like a man who will not pluck a flower from its garden, he could not bear to see her removed from the hot, lush, squalid city that had spawned her. It was part of her exotica. So my father stayed in Calcutta. Now his flower was gone. He pressed his thin chapped lips to the satin of my hair. I remember opening my eyes—they felt tight and shiny, parched by the flames—and looking up at the column of smoke that roiled into the sky full of blood and milk.

There would be no milk for me, only chemical-tasting drops of formula from a plastic nipple. The morgue was in the basement of the hospital and did not burn. My mother lay on a metal table, a hospital gown stiff with her dying sweat pulled up over her red-smeared crotch and thighs. Her eyes stared up through the blackened skeleton of the hospital, up to the milky bloody sky, and ash filtered down to mask her pupils.

My father and I left for America before the monsoon came. Without my mother Calcutta was a pestilential hellhole, a vast cremation grounds, or

so my father thought. In America he could send me to school and movies, ball games and Boy Scouts, secure in the knowledge that someone else would take care of me or I would take care of myself. There were no *thuggees* to rob me and cut my throat, no *goondas* who would snatch me and sell my bones for fertilizer. There were no cows to infect the streets with their steaming sacred piss. My father could give me over to the comparative wholesomeness of American life, leaving himself free to sit in his darkened bedroom and drink whiskey until his long sensitive nose floated hazily in front of his face and the sabre edge of his grief began to dull. He was the sort of man who has only one love in his lifetime, and knows with the sick fervor of a fatalist that this love will be taken from his someday, and is hardly surprised when it happens.

When he was drunk he would talk about Calcutta. My little American mind rejected the place—I was in love with air conditioning, hamburgers and pizza, the free and undiscriminating love that was lavished upon me every time I twisted the TV dial—but somewhere in my Indian heart I longed for it. When I turned eighteen and my father finally failed to wake up from one of his drunken stupors, I returned to the city of my bloody birth as soon as I had the plane fare in my hand.

Calcutta, you will say. What a place to have been when the dead began to walk.

And I reply, what better place to be? What better place than a city where five million people look as if they are already dead—might as well be dead—and another five million wish they were?

I have a friend named Devi, a prostitute who began her work at the age of fifteen from a tarpaper shack on Sudder Street. Sudder is the Bourbon Street of Calcutta, but there is far less of the carnival there, and no one wears a mask on Sudder Street because disguises are useless when shame is irrelevant. Devi works the big hotels now, selling American tourists or British expatriates or German businessmen a taste of exotic Bengal spice. She is gaunt and beautiful and hard as nails. Devi says the world is a whore, too, and Calcutta is the pussy of the world. The world squats and spreads its legs, and Calcutta is the dank sex you see revealed there, wet and fragrant with a thousand odors both delicious and foul. A source of lushest pleasure, a breeding ground for every conceivable disease.

The pussy of the world. It is all right with me. I like pussy, and I love my squalid city.

The dead like pussy too. If they are able to catch a woman and disable her enough so that she cannot resist, you will see the lucky ones burrowing in between her legs as happily as the most avid lover. They do not have to come up for air. I have seen them eat all the way up into the body cavity. The internal female organs seem to be a great delicacy, and why not? They are the caviar of the human body. It is a sobering thing to come across a woman sprawled in the gutter with her intestines sliding from the shredded ruin of her womb, but you do not react. You do not distract the dead from their repast. They are slow and stupid, but that is all the more reason for you to be smart and quick and quiet. They will do the same thing to a man—chew off the soft penis and scrotal sac like choice morsels of squid, leaving only a red raw hole. But you can sidle by while they are feeding and they will not notice you. I do not try to hide from them. I walk the streets and look; that is all I do anymore. I am fascinated. This is not horror, this is simply more of Calcutta.

First I would sleep late, through the sultry morning into the heat of the afternoon. I had a room in one of the decrepit marble palaces of the old city. Devi visited me here often, but on a typical morning I woke alone, clad only in twisted bedsheets and a luxurious patina of sweat. Sun came through the window and fell in bright bars across the floor. I felt safe in my second-story room as long as I kept the door locked. The dead were seldom able to navigate stairs, and they could not manage the sustained cooperative effort to break down a locked door. They were no threat to me. They fed upon those who had given up, those too traumatized to keep running: the senile, abandoned old, the catatonic young women who sat in gutters cradling babies that had died during the night. These were easy prey.

The walls of my room were painted a bright coral and the sills and door were aqua. The colors caught the sun and made the day seem cheerful despite the heat that shimmered outside. I went downstairs, crossed the empty courtyard with its dry marble fountain, and went out into the street. This area was barren in the heat, painfully bright, with parched weeds lining the road and an occasional smear of cow dung decorating the gutter. By nightfall both weeds and dung might be gone. Children collected cow shit and patted it into cakes held together with straw, which could be sold as fuel for cooking fires.

I headed toward Chowringhee Road, the broad main thoroughfare of the city. Halfway up my street, hunched under the awning of a mattress

factory, I saw one of the catatonic young mothers. The dead had found her too. They had already taken the baby from her arms and eaten through the soft part at the top of the skull. Vacuous bloody faces rose and dipped. Curds of tender brain fell from slack mouths. The mother sat on the curb nearby, her arms cradling nothing. She wore a filthy green sari that was ripped across the chest. The woman's breasts protruded heavily, swollen with milk. When the dead finished with her baby they would start on her, and she would make no resistance. I had seen it before. I knew how the milk would spurt and then gush as they tore into her breasts. I knew how hungrily they would lap up the twin rivers of blood and milk.

Above their bobbing heads, the tin awning dripped long ropy strands of cotton. Cotton hung from the roof in dirty clumps, caught in the corners of the doorway like spiderweb. Someone's radio blared faintly in another part of the building, tuned to an English-language Christian broadcast. A gospel hymn assured Calcutta that its dead in Christ would rise. I moved on toward Chowringhee.

Most of the streets in the city are positively cluttered with buildings. Buildings are packed in cheek-by-jowl, helter-skelter, like books of different sizes jammed into a rickety bookcase. Buildings even sag over the street so that all you see overhead is a narrow strip of sky crisscrossed by miles of clotheslines. The flapping silks and cottons are very bright against the sodden, dirty sky. But there are certain vantage points where the city opens up and all at once you have a panoramic view of Calcutta. You see a long muddy hillside that has become home to a *bustee*, thousands and thousands of slum dwellings where tiny fires are tended through the night. The dead come often to these slums of tin and cardboard, but the people do not leave the *bustee*—where would they go? Or you see a wasteland of disused factories, empty warehouses, blackened smokestacks jutting into a rust-colored sky. Or a flash of the Hooghly River, steel-gray in its shroud of mist, spanned by the intricate girder-and-wirescape of the Howrah Bridge.

Just now I was walking opposite the river. The waterfront was not considered a safe place because of the danger from drowning victims. Thousands each year took the long plunge off the bridge, and thousands more simply waded into the water. It is easy to commit suicide at a riverfront because despair collects in the water vapor. This is part of the reason for the tangible cloud of despair that hangs over Calcutta along with its veil of humidity.

Now the suicides and the drowned street children were coming out of the river. At any moment the water might regurgitate one, and you would hear him scrabbling up the bank. If he had been in the water long enough he might tear himself to spongy gobbets on the stones and broken bricks that littered the waterfront; all that remained would be a trace of foul brown odor, like the smell of mud from the deep part of the river.

Police—especially the Sikhs, who are said to be more violent than Hindus—had been taking the dead up on the bridge to shoot them. Even from far away I could see spray-patterns of red on the drab girders. Alternatively they set the dead alight with gasoline and threw them over the railing into the river. At night it was not uncommon to see several writhing shapes caught in the downstream current, the fiery symmetry of their heads and arms and legs making them into five-pointed human stars.

I stopped at a spice vendor's stand to buy a bunch of red chrysanthemums and a handful of saffron. The saffron I had him wrap in a twist of scarlet silk. "It is a beautiful day," I said to him in Bengali. He stared at me, half amused, half appalled. "A beautiful day for what?" True Hindu faith calls upon the believer to view all things as equally sacred. There is nothing profane—no dirty dog picking through the ash bin at a cremation ground, no stinking gangrenous stump thrust into your face by a beggar who seems to hold you personally responsible for all his woes. These things are as sacred as feasting day at the holiest temple. But even for the most devout Hindus it has been difficult to see these walking dead as sacred. They are empty humans. That is the truly horrifying thing about them, more than their vacuous hunger for living flesh, more than the blood caked under their nails or the shreds of flesh caught between their teeth. They are soulless; there is nothing in their eyes; the sounds they make—their farts, their grunts and mewls of hunger—are purely reflexive. The Hindu, who has been taught to believe in the soul of everything, has a particular horror of these drained human vessels. But in Calcutta life goes on. The shops are still open. The confusion of traffic still inches its way up Chowringhee. No one sees any alternatives.

Soon I arrived at what was almost invariably my day's first stop. I would often walk twenty or thirty miles in a day—I had strong shoes and nothing to occupy my time except walking and looking. But I always began at the Kalighat, temple of the Goddess.

There are a million names for her, a million vivid descriptions: Kali the Terrible, Kali the Ferocious, skull-necklace, destroyer of men, eater of souls. But to me she was Mother Kali, the only one of the vast and colorful pantheon of Hindu gods that stirred my imagination and lifted my heart. She was the Destroyer, but all final refuge was found in her. She was the goddess of the age. She could bleed and burn and still rise again, very awake, beautifully terrible.

I ducked under the garlands of marigolds and strands of temple bells strung across the door, and I entered the temple of Kali. After the constant clamor of the street, the silence inside the temple was deafening. I fancied I could hear the small noises of my body echoing back to me from the ceiling far above. The sweet opium glaze of incense curled around my head. I approached the idol of Kali, the *jagrata*. Her gimlet eyes watched me as I came closer.

She was tall, gaunter and more brazenly naked than my friend Devi even at her best moments. Her breasts were tipped with blood—at least I always imagined them so—and her two sharp fangs and the long streamer of a tongue that uncurled from her open mouth were the color of blood too. Her hair whipped about her head and her eyes were wild, but the third crescent eye in the center of her forehead was merciful; it saw and accepted all. The necklace of skulls circled the graceful stem of her neck, adorned the sculpted hollow of her throat. Her four arms were so sinuous that if you looked away even for an instant, they seemed to sway. In her four hands she held a noose of rope, a skull-staff, a shining sword, and a gaping, very dead-looking severed head. A silver bowl sat at the foot of the statue just beneath the head, where the blood from the neck would drip. Sometimes this was filled with goat's or sheep's blood as an offering. The bowl was full today. In these times the blood might well be human, though there was no putrid smell to indicate it had come from one of the dead.

I laid my chrysanthemums and saffron at Kali's feet. Among the other offerings, mostly sweets and bundles of spice, I saw a few strange objects. A fingerbone. A shrivelled mushroom of flesh that turned out upon closer inspection to be an ear. There were offerings for special protection, mostly wrested from the dead. But who was to say that a few devotees had not lopped off their own ears or finger joints to coax a boon from Kali? Sometimes when I had forgotten to bring an offering, I cut my wrist with a razor blade and let a few drops of my blood fall at the idol's feet.

I heard a shout from outside and turned my head for a moment. When I looked back, the four arms seemed to have woven themselves into a new pattern, the long tongue seemed to loll farther from the scarlet mouth. And —this was a frequent fantasy of mine—the wide hips now seemed to tilt forward, affording me a glimpse of the sweet and terrible petalled cleft between the thighs of the goddess.

I smiled up at the lovely sly face. “If only I had a tongue as long as yours, Mother,” I murmured, “I would kneel before you and lick the folds of your holy pussy until you screamed with joy.” The toothy grin seemed to grow wider, more lascivious. I imagined much in the presence of Kali.

Outside in the temple yard I saw the source of the shout I had heard. There is a stone block upon which the animals brought to Kali, mostly baby goats, are beheaded by the priests. A gang of roughly dressed men had captured a dead girl and were bashing her head in on the sacrificial block. Their arms rose and fell, ropy muscles flexing. They clutched sharp stones and bits of brick in their scrawny hands. The girl’s half-pulped head still lashed back and forth. The lower jaw still snapped, though the teeth and bone were splintered. Foul thin blood coursed down and mingled with the rich animal blood in the earth beneath the block. The girl was nude, filthy with her own gore and waste. The flaccid breasts hung as if sucked dry of meat. The belly was burst open with gases. One of the men thrust a stick into the ruined gouge between the girl’s legs and leaned on it with all his weight.

Only in extensive stages of decay can the dead be told from the lepers. The dead are greater in number now, and even the lepers look human when compared to the dead. But that is only if you get close enough to look into the eyes. The faces in various stages of wet and dry rot, the raw ends of bones rubbing through skin like moldy cheesecloth, the cancerous domes of the skulls are the same. After a certain point lepers could no longer stay alive begging in the streets, for most people would now flee in terror at the sight of a rotting face. As a result the lepers were dying, then coming back, and the two races mingled like some obscene parody of incest. Perhaps they actually could breed. The dead could obviously eat and digest, and seemed to excrete at random like everyone else in Calcutta, but I supposed no one knew whether they could ejaculate or conceive.

A stupid idea, really. A dead womb would rot to pieces around a fetus before it could come halfway to term; a dead scrotal sac would be far too

cold a cradle for living seed. But no one seemed to know anything about the biology of the dead. The newspapers were hysterical, printing picture upon picture of random slaughter by dead and living alike. Radio stations had either gone off the air or were broadcasting endless religious exhortations that ran together in one long keening whine, the edges of Muslim, Hindu, Christian doctrine beginning to fray and blur.

No one in India could say for sure what made the dead walk. The latest theory I had heard was something about a genetically engineered microbe that had been designed to feed on plastic: a microbe that would save the world from its own waste. But the microbe had mutated and was now eating and "replicating" human cells, causing basic bodily functions to reactivate. It did not much matter whether this was true. Calcutta was a city relatively unsurprised to see its dead rise and walk and feed upon it. It had seen them doing so for a hundred years.

All the rest of the lengthening day I walked through the city. I saw no more dead except a cluster far away at the end of a blocked street, in the last rags of bloody light, fighting each other over the bloated carcass of a sacred cow.

My favorite place at sunset is by the river where I can see the Howrah Bridge. The Hooghly is painfully beautiful in the light of the setting sun. The last rays melt onto the water like hot *ghee*, turning the river from steel to khaki to nearly golden, a blazing ribbon of light. The bridge rises black and skeletal into the fading orange sky. Tonight an occasional skirl of bright flowers and still-glowing greasy embers floated by, the last earthly traces of bodies cremated farther up the river. Above the bridge were the burning *ghats* where families lined up to incinerate their dead and cast the ashes into the holy river. Cremation is done more efficiently these days, or at least more hurriedly. People can reconcile in their hearts their fear of strangers' dead, but they do not want to see their own dead rise.

I walked along the river for a while. The wind off the water carried the scent of burning meat. When I was well away from the bridge, I wandered back into the maze of narrow streets and alleyways that lead toward the docks in the far southern end of the city. People were already beginning to settle in for the night, though here a bedroom might mean your own packing crate or your own square of sidewalk. Fires glowed in nooks and corners.

A warm breeze still blew off the river and sighed its way through the winding streets. It seemed very late now. As I made my way from corner to corner, through intermittent pools of light and much longer patches of darkness, I heard small bells jingling to the rhythm of my footsteps. The brass bells of rickshaw men, ringing to tell me they were there in case I wished for a ride. But I could see none of the men. The effect was eerie, as if I were walking alone down an empty nighttime street being serenaded by ghostly bells. The feeling soon passed. You are never truly alone in Calcutta.

A thin hand slid out of the darkness as I passed. Looking into the doorway it came from, I could barely make out five gaunt faces, five forms huddled against the night. I dropped several coins into the hand and it slid out of sight again. I am seldom begged from. I look neither rich nor poor, but I have a talent for making myself all but invisible. People look past me, sometimes right through me. I don’t mind; I see more things that way. But when I am begged from I always give. With my handful of coins, all five of them might have a bowl of rice and lentils tomorrow.

A bowl of rice and lentils in the morning, a drink of water from a broken standpipe at night.

It seemed to me that the dead were among the best-fed citizens of Calcutta.

Now I crossed a series of narrow streets and was surprised to find myself coming up behind the Kalighat. The side streets are so haphazardly arranged that you are constantly finding yourself in places you had no idea you were even near. I had been to the Kalighat hundreds of times, but I had never approached it from this direction. The temple was dark and still. I had not been here at this hour before, did not even know whether the priests were still here or if one could enter so late. But as I walked closer I saw a little door standing open at the back. The entrance used by the priests, perhaps. Something flickered from within: a candle, a tiny mirror sewn on a robe, the smoldering end of a stick of incense.

I slipped around the side of the temple and stood at the door for a moment. A flight of stone steps led up into the darkness of the temple. The Kalighat at night, deserted, might have been an unpleasant prospect to some. The thought of facing the fierce idol alone in the gloom might have made some turn away from those steps. I began to climb them.

The smell reached me before I ascended halfway. To spend a day walking through Calcutta is to be assailed by thousands of odors both pleasant and foul: the savor of spices frying in *ghee*, the stink of shit and urine and garbage, the sick-sweet scent of the little white flowers called *mogra* that are sold in garlands and that make me think of the gardenia perfume American undertakers use to mask the smell of their corpses.

Almost everyone in Calcutta is scrupulously clean in person, even the very poor. They will leave their trash and their spit everywhere, but many of them wash their bodies twice a day. Still, everyone sweats under the sodden veil of heat, and at midday any public place will be redolent with the smell of human perspiration, a delicate tang like the mingled juices of lemons and onions. But lingering in the stairwell was an odor stronger and more foul than any I had encountered today. It was deep and brown and moist; it curled at the edges like a mushroom beginning to dry. It was the perfume of mortal corruption. It was the smell of rotting flesh.

Then I came up into the temple, and I saw them.

The large central room was lit only with candles that flickered in a restless draft, first this way, then that. In the dimness the worshippers looked no different from any other supplicants at the feet of Kali. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the candlelight, details resolved themselves. The withered hands, the ruined faces. The burst body cavities where ropy organs could be seen trailing down behind the cagework of ribs.

The offerings they had brought.

By day Kali grinned down upon an array of blossoms and sweetmeats lovingly arranged at the foot of her pedestal. The array spread there now seemed more suited to the goddess. I saw human heads balanced on raw stumps of necks, eyes turned up to crescents of silver-white. I saw gobbets of meat that might have been torn from a belly or a thigh. I saw severed hands like pale lotus flowers, the fingers like petals opening silently in the night.

Most of all, piled on every side of the altar, I saw bones. Bones picked so clean that they gleamed in the candlelight. Bones with smears of meat and long snotty runners of fat still attached. Skinny arm-bones, clubby leg-bones, the pretzel of a pelvis, the beadwork of a spine. The delicate bones of children. The crumbling ivory bones of the old. The bones of those who could not run.

These things the dead brought to their goddess. She had been their goddess all along, and they her acolytes.

Kali's smile was hungrier than ever. The tongue lolled like a wet red streamer from the open mouth. The eyes were blazing black holes in the gaunt and terrible face. If she had stepped down from her pedestal and approached me now, if she had reached for me with those sinuous arms, I might not have been able to fall to my knees before her. I might have run. There are beauties too terrible to be borne.

Slowly the dead began to turn toward me. Their faces lifted and the rotting cavities of their nostrils caught my scent. Their eyes shone iridescent. Faint starry light shimmered in the empty spaces of their bodies. They were like cutouts in the fabric of reality, like conduits to a blank universe. The void where Kali ruled and the only comfort was in death.

They did not approach me. They stood holding their precious offerings and they looked at me—those of them that still had eyes—or they looked through me. At that moment I felt more than invisible. I felt empty enough to belong among these human shells.

A ripple seemed to pass through them. Then—in the uncertain candlelight, in the light that shimmered from the bodies of the dead—Kali did move.

The twitch of a finger, the deft turn of a wrist—at first it was so slight as to be nearly imperceptible. But then her lips split into an impossibly wide, toothy grin and the tip of her long tongue curled. She rotated her hips and swung her left leg high into the air. The foot that had trod on millions of corpses made a *pointe* as delicate as a prima ballerina's. The movement spread her sex wide open.

But it was not the petalled mandala-like cleft I had imagined kissing earlier. The pussy of the goddess was an enormous deep red hole that seemed to lead down to the center of the world. It was a gash in the universe, it was rimmed in blood and ash. Two of her four hands beckoned toward it, inviting me in. I could have thrust my head into it, then my shoulders, I could have crawled all the way into that wet crimson eternity, and kept crawling forever.

Then I did run. Before I had even decided to flee I found myself falling down the stone staircase, cracking my head and my knee on the risers. At the bottom I was up and running before I could register the pain. I told myself that I thought the dead would come after me. I do not know what I

truly feared was at my back. At times I thought I was running not away from something, but toward it.

I ran all night. When my legs grew too tired to carry me I would board a bus. Once I crossed the bridge and found myself in Howrah, the even poorer suburb on the other side of the Hooghly. I stumbled through desolate streets for an hour or more before doubling back and crossing over into Calcutta again. Once I stopped to ask for a drink of water from a man who carried two cans of it slung on a long stick across his shoulders. He would not let me drink from his tin cup, but poured a little water into my cupped hands. In his face I saw the mingled pity and disgust with which one might look upon a drunk or a beggar. I was a well-dressed beggar, to be sure, but he saw the fear in my eyes.

In the last hour of the night I found myself wandering through a wasteland of factories and warehouses, of smokestacks and rusty corrugated tin gates, of broken windows. There seemed to be thousands of broken windows. After a while I realized I was on the Upper Chitpur Road. I walked for a while in the watery light that fills the sky before dawn. Eventually I left the road and staggered through the wasteland. Not until I saw its girders rising around me like the charred bones of a prehistoric animal did I realize I was in the ruins of the hospital where I had been born.

The hole of the basement had filled up with broken glass and crumbling metal, twenty years' worth of cinders and weeds, all washed innocent in the light of the breaking dawn. Where the building had stood there was only a vast depression in the ground, five or six feet deep. I slid down the shallow embankment, rolled, and came to rest in the ashes. They were infinitely soft; they cradled me. I felt as safe as an embryo. I let the sunrise bathe me. Perhaps I had climbed into the gory chasm between Kali's legs after all, and found my way out again.

Calcutta is cleansed each morning by the dawn. If only the sun rose a thousand times a day, the city would always be clean.

Ashes drifted over me, smudged my hands gray, flecked my lips. I lay safe in the womb of my city, called by its poets Lord of Nerves, city of joy, the pussy of the world. I felt as if I lay among the dead. I was that safe from them: I knew their goddess, I shared their many homes. As the sun came up over the mud and glory of Calcutta, the sky was so full of smoky clouds and pale pink light that it seemed, to my eyes, to burn.

LANTERN MARSH

The marsh brooded on the outskirts of town. We children sometimes played there during the day, poling flat-bottomed boats through the dark water choked with swamp hyacinth, stranding ourselves on any of the hundreds of tiny islands. By day the marsh was a place of filtering, shifting patches of sunlight, cypress and live oak bearded with Spanish moss, velvety brown cattails that would burst into clouds of white snow if you smacked them against the back of your friend's head, and unfounded rumors of quicksand pools full of skeletons and treasure.

At night, the lanterns took over.

Our parents forbade us to go into the marsh at night. Usually this rule needed no enforcing, but at one time or another, most of us had worked up enough courage to creep to the edge of the marsh with a group of friends, stare for a while at the bright globes of light hovering over the water, and then run away as fast as our legs could carry us. Later, we would laugh and call one another fraidy-cat, but not until we were back home in somebody's warm, well-lit room. After all, no one really knew what the lanterns were—our science teachers dismissed them as swamp gas, but hardly anybody believed that—or what they could do, if in fact they wanted to do anything besides hover and shimmer, be beautiful luminous ghosts.

We had lived in the town named after this marsh all our lives

#

Our first encounter with Mr. Prudhomme—and the first indication I had that Noel was perhaps not entirely sane about the marsh—took place on a Halloween afternoon when we (Noel, Bronwen, and me, Phil) were all ten years old. School had let out early that day. By some obscure tradition, Halloween in Lantern Marsh had always been a big occasion for the kids—

maybe just because there wasn't really much for us to do the rest of the year—so the schools scheduled a half-day or canceled altogether.

The three of us were walking down the town's main street, enjoying the tangy autumn flavor of the air. This was the Deep South and Halloween often felt more like August, but this year we were having a decent cool season. Bronwen and I were talking about the costumes we were going to wear that night. Noel, who never went trick-or-treating, walked silently along beside us, hands shoved in pockets, thinking his private thoughts.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks and stared across the street. "Look—look—there he is!"

We were used to Noel's intense reactions, but this time we had no idea what he might be reacting to. "Who?" I asked.

Noel jerked his head toward a shop door on the other side of the street, where a tall red-haired man stood talking to the shopkeeper. "That's George Prudhomme, the guy who runs that building company—Marshwood Development. He's a fucking bastard."

"Noel!" said Bronwen.

"Well, he *is*! He owns half the land the marsh is on. Last year, right after Halloween, he told my mother I'd been trespassing on his land. I didn't even go into the marsh, I was just watching the lanterns like I always do, but she bawled me out anyway. This year I told her I was going out trick-or-treating with you guys."

Noel had lived with his mother for seven years, ever since his father left for parts unknown. She was a big, ruddy woman who always smelled of cigarettes, and she frightened me and Bronwen a little, but she and Noel had negotiated an uneasy peace.

"Why *don't* you come out with us?" I said. "Seems like that'd be a lot more fun than watching those old lanterns again." Although I knew the lanterns were magic to Noel, I couldn't conceive of not wanting to go trick-or-treating. The idea of coming home at the end of the night empty-handed, with no laden plastic bag into which you could stick your face and breathe the odor of all kinds of candy mingling…

But Noel just shook his head.

Bronwen tucked a scrap of yellow hair behind her ear as she looked across the street at Prudhomme. "That man wants to hurt you, Noel."

I looked at her, puzzled. Why had she said that? But the red-haired man was beckoning to Noel. Bronwen clutched Noel's arm. "Don't go!"

“It’s OK, Bron. He can’t hurt me here.”

Noel crossed the street and stood in front of the big man, fists on hips, dark shaggy head thrown back, looking ridiculously small. Prudhomme said something to him, and Noel shook his head *no*. After a moment or two, Bronwen and I relaxed—it looked like they were just going to have a conversation after all. But then Noel began to shout.

“You can’t do it, you dirty *shit*! I know you can’t, because you only own half of it! And if you ever try, I…I’ll kill you! I swear I will!” Prudhomme stared obliquely down at him. When Noel turned and ran back to us, I saw that his features were contorted with rage, close to tears. Without waiting to see whether we would follow, he started off down the street, his back held stiff and straight. We hurried after him, not knowing what else to do.

When we caught up with him, all three of us strode along in silence for several minutes. Then Bronwen, always the peacemaker, touched Noel’s shoulder and asked, “What did he say?”

Noel scowled. “He told me to stay away from the marsh tonight, like he always does if he sees me around Halloween. But I don’t care what he says. He’ll never know—he’s too scared to go near the marsh on Halloween night. And he ought to be scared, too, because I bet they hate him as much as I do.”

They? He meant the lanterns, I realized. Though I knew how they obsessed him, I’d never known that he believed they could love or hate.

But this realization was overshadowed by another. “That’s not what made you so mad,” I said.

Noel gazed at me. The expression on his face now was more fear than fury. “He said—he said someday he was going to fill in the marsh!” His lips trembled and he bit at them, swallowing hard. Finally he cried.

And well he might, for Noel had lived at the edge of the marsh all his life. His house was closer to it than any other in town. Ever since Bronwen and I had made friends with him in the first grade, we had been familiar with his fierce hatreds and equally fierce loves, his wild plans that always seemed to work, the mixture of sadness and rage that always seemed to linger just below the surface of his eyes…and his utter refusal to go trick-or-treating on Halloween night. Instead he would sit for hours at the edge of the water and watch and watch the lanterns as if they were his own personal light show. On Halloween, he claimed, they were at their most spectacular.

Spirits could visit the living world on Halloween, and Noel had always thought the lanterns were spirits. There were hundreds of the great glowing balls, and more mirrored in the dark water. They darted and showered sparks and made the whole marsh glow, and most of us had grandparents or other older relatives who'd assured us that anyone foolish enough to go into the marsh on the spirits' night wouldn't come out again. Noel brushed off all these warnings. He didn't go into the marsh on Halloween; he only wanted to watch. He was never able to explain this to the satisfaction of me and Bronwen, who loved our conventional, costumed Halloween as much as any other kids. It took us a few years to realize that Halloween was a time of magic for Noel too, magic far more potent than ours.

#

After the night's adventures, we crept to the edge of the marsh with the taste of candy in our mouths and the smell of burning pumpkin flesh still trailing behind us. Bronwen was a yellow-haired gypsy rattling loads of costume jewelry. I was a black-masked bandit marred by my mother's strips of orange reflecting tape. We would never have gone alone to the marsh on Halloween night, but knowing that Noel would be there, we felt protected somehow.

"Noel?" I whispered into the darkness.

Something white rose up behind a tree. Bronwen gave a little shriek, but the flapping shape said "Ssssst!" and waved us over. When we got to him, I saw that Noel was in costume, presumably to fool his mother. He was dressed all in white, with white smudges of makeup around his dark, dark eyes. If the spookiness of the marsh itself hadn't scared off any intruders, Noel might have.

Bronwen held out an extra bag heavy with candy corn and miniature chocolate bars. "We brought you some."

Noel accepted the bag like a prince and gave us one of his rare smiles. "Thanks." He considered us for a moment and apparently found us worthy. "Do you want to see them?" I hesitated, but Bronwen nodded.

Noel led us to his spot behind the tree. I looked into the depths of the marsh and saw nothing. Bronwen glanced off to the left and said "*Oh!*",

enthralled. For there they were, the hovering, darting colored globes. They drew closer as we watched. Depthless black water reflected them back a hundred times over, rippling and shimmering. Their pale light spilled between the trees, bathing our faces; tiny lanterns danced in Noel's eyes. For the first time I knew that he wanted to join them, whatever the price of that joining might be. But he had always been adamant about looking after his mother, who would be alone without him. For now, at least, he would have to content himself with these nighttime glimpses.

We watched the lanterns dance for what felt like hours, until I heard my mother calling me home from blocks away.

#

Eventually Bronwen and I graduated from trick-or-treating to costume parties at our friends' houses. Noel, though, still spent his rapt nights at the edge of the marsh each Halloween. He and George Prudhomme glared at each other when they met in the drugstore or the Central Park Café, but as far as I knew, no more words passed between them. We moved up from elementary school to the county consolidated junior high, where Noel's strangeness was judged less acceptable by kids who hadn't known him most of his life. Noel refused to even try to act normal, and so he was tormented. "The three C's of adolescence," he said to us more than once, "clothes, cliques, and cruelty." But he answered the teasing with sarcasm or indifference. Being ignored only made his tormentor angrier, and if he had to, Noel would fight. He usually won, too; Noel was skinny but wiry, and he clawed at his opponents with a mad abandon that usually kept them from challenging him twice.

By the time we got to high school, most people left Noel alone. He would never be accepted, but acceptance wasn't something he needed. More and more often, instead of going to the pep club meetings or basketball games that had captivated us earlier in our teens, Bronwen and I would join Noel in his room after school to listen to the Beatles, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix. We were learning that we didn't need acceptance either.

The three of us, now as close again as we had been in childhood, decided to form a band. Bronwen could play the guitar a little, and I began

to get interested in drumming, something I'd previously practiced on the edges of desks and dinner tables. My parents bought me a used set, good enough to start out on, for fifty dollars. Noel needed no instrument. He had a high wail of a singing voice, huge and soulful and strangely beautiful. Our name, of course, was the Lanterns. We played at a couple of school dances, doing mostly Beatles and Stones covers but also a few songs Noel had written himself. We weren't well-received by the dance crowds, and after our first two gigs we were replaced by another garage band that played fifties hits and beach music. Noel didn't care. He had never been concerned about performing in public anyway, especially to a high school audience; he had only agreed to it because the idea excited me and Bronwen.

We didn't play any more gigs, but the Lanterns lasted through the summer after our high school graduation. Then Bronwen and I went to the state university, and Noel, who was planning to major in music, went to a small liberal arts college about a hundred miles away from Lantern Marsh. His mother wasn't happy to see him go, but as he had received a full scholarship, she could do nothing to stop him. At the state school, Bronwen and I met crowds of new people, but we always came back to each other. Noel wrote us long letters about learning to play guitar and piano (which he liked) and the atmosphere at his college, elite and self-consciously eccentric (which he claimed to dislike, but even he had to admit it beat high school). I bought a secondhand green Volkswagen Bug. Bronwen got her ears pierced. Things went smoothly until our fall break, when we were pleased to find out that Noel would be coming home at the same time we would.

Driving home, I gave half my attention to Bronwen and half to worrying about my bald tires. My parents had offered to replace them while I was home, but I wasn't even sure they would last out the trip. As we approached Lantern Marsh, my worry was interrupted. Bronwen gasped and craned forward in her seat. "Phil—look!"

We were entering town by a road that went past a far edge of the marsh. The marsh was still there, of course; but it was changed, weakened. Instead of a line of cypress and oak, I saw stumps, red mud, bulldozers and dump trucks. A large patch of land had been filled and cleared. A billboard announced in foot-high red letters:

FUTURE SITE OF

MARSHWOOD MALL
A PROPERTY OF MARSHWOOD DEVELOPMENT

At home, my father confirmed my fears. “George Prudhomme bought the rest of the marsh. Shame to tear it up if you ask me, but it wasn’t making the town any money. People say he’s having the whole thing filled in to build a new shopping center with a double-decker parking lot. You used to have a friend who liked the marsh, didn’t you, Phil?”

When I called Noel’s house, his mother said he wouldn’t be home until the next day. Her voice on the phone was little more than a faint wheeze, and I wondered if she was thinking of what Prudhomme’s plans might do to her son. Bronwen had gone out to dinner at the Three Lanterns Steakhouse with her family. My mom had fixed a welcome-home meal of pork chops, mashed potatoes, and strawberry shortcake, all my favorites. I wasn’t able to enjoy it much. My parents could tell I was worried, but they thought it must have something to do with school. Of course I wasn’t thinking about school at all. I was wondering what in the world we were going to say to Noel tomorrow, and whether it would do any good.

#

As it turned out, we didn’t have to break the news to him. His bus had come into town by the same road we’d used, so he already knew. His mother looked awful when she let us in. She’d always been a fleshy woman, and still was, but now the flesh seemed to sag off her bones. Her color was high and unhealthy-looking, as if she’d been running a fever. “He’s in his room,” she told us. “Hasn’t hardly been out since he got here.”

Bronwen knocked on the door. “Come in,” said Noel hollowly.

He was sitting in the dark. Well, not quite; he had put his red light bulb in the bedside lamp. It cast a bloody glow over the room but offered little illumination. Noel’s eyes were nothing but dark hollows in his angular face.

“What are you going to do?” Bronwen asked, putting her hand on his arm.

“Kill Prudhomme,” he said without fervor. “Nine years ago I told him I’d kill him if he ever tried this. Now I’ve got to do it.”

This made me impatient. “Come on, Noel. You can’t kill Prudhomme. What would that accomplish? You’d go to jail and the mall would get built anyway.”

Noel nodded. I wasn’t sure he’d heard me, but he already knew the truth of what I said. He stared at a poster on the wall behind Bronwen and me, Jim Morrison in his Lizard King pose. “What am I going to do, you ask? I’m going to sit here and watch Prudhomme tear up the marsh. Maybe they’ll be able to stop him, maybe not. If I could join them, I’d damn well stop him.”

“You mean the lanterns?” Bronwen asked timidly. But we all knew what he meant. Noel had always wanted to join the lanterns, to become one with them, but his mother would be alone in the world without him. Now I wondered if even that would be enough to keep him here.

He lay back on his bed. “Listen, I need to think. Can you leave me alone for a while?” We nodded and left silently. It was the first time Noel had ever sent us away.

The next afternoon, as I was leaving the house, my father stopped me with a stricken look on his face. “Have you talked to your friend Noel?”

“Not today, but I was just going over there.”

“You won’t find him at his house.”

“Why not?”

Dad sighed. “Phil, Noel’s mother died last night. She had a stroke, was gone right away. Noel called 911, but when the ambulance got there, they couldn’t find him. No one’s seen the boy since.”

A thought nudged me. With exams right before the break, I’d lost track of dates…“What day is this?”

“The thirty-first,” my father said, and I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten.

“BRONWEN!” I yelled, still half a block away and glimpsing her yellow hair through the foliage that masked her front porch. Soon we were running toward the marsh where it came closest to Noel’s house. We hunted up one of the flat-bottomed boats we hadn’t used since we were twelve or so. Awkwardly, too heavy for the boats, we poled through the edges of the marsh calling Noel’s name. He could be anywhere, but I wanted to find him before nightfall. Because now, with his mother gone, there was nothing to hold him here.

It felt as though we covered miles of the marsh, sometimes poling and sometimes just letting the boat drift, starting with hope at every bird-sound and frog-ripple. As the sky between the trees deepened into twilight, our courage failed. We dragged the boat back up onto solid ground behind Noel's house. Blocks away, we heard the shouts of early trick-or-treaters.

Something white rose up behind a tree.

"I came to say goodbye," said Noel. As he had been years ago, he was dressed all in white. There were no theatrical smudges of makeup around his eyes this time, just dark circles of exhaustion. He'd been up all night, I could tell. "I knew you'd come here, but I can't stay long. I couldn't go without saying goodbye."

"Don't go," I said.

"You know I have to."

He leaned toward Bronwen and kissed her lips. Then he turned to me, and I hugged him as hard as I could. I might have been able to hold him back at that moment, but I didn't try. I let him go. "Goodbye, Bron…Phil," he whispered, and his voice broke just a little on my name. Then he stepped into our little boat and, standing easily, pushed himself away from the land. He was far better at it than we had been, shifting his weight with the water. He knew this marsh so well.

Soon the boat was invisible through the moss-fringed trees; we could just make out the white form of Noel guiding it between the shadowy hummocks of grass. The lanterns flickered in the distance. We could tell when Noel reached them, because they began to dance. Their colors grew brighter, as if disturbed at the intruder in their midst. Bronwen's hand tightened on my arm, and I covered it with my own.

Noel began to sing to the lanterns.

At first his voice reached us like a thread of leftover summer breeze, faint but sweet. Then it grew stronger, and though I couldn't make out the words, I knew Noel had penned them himself. His voice was hoarse and high, more gorgeous than ever. In it was the Arcadian splendor of the marsh and its spookiness, the joy it had brought him and the anguish he felt at losing it, the pure golden glory of the lanterns themselves. It was a tribute and a plea. We could see his tiny form in the distance, the lanterns surrounding him, weaving around him, dancing to Noel's song. "Now! Now! NOW…" I heard him shriek, and the lanterns suddenly grew brighter than we'd ever seen them, so bright we could not look at them. We turned

away, shielding our eyes from what might have been a small supernova in the heart of the marsh. When we looked back, the blinding light had vanished. Noel and the lanterns were gone.

No one in town expected to see Noel again. They figured he'd either gone back to his arty school or drowned in the fabled quicksand of the marsh on Halloween night, and no one outside of our tiny circle much cared. But a week later, just before Bronwen and I were due back at school, Lantern Marsh discovered that one of its more solid citizens had gone missing. The police wouldn't do anything for twenty-four hours, so Marshwood Development organized its own search party; rumor had it that things hadn't been going well at the company, and perhaps they were nervous. They had reason. Before the day was out they found George Prudhomme hanged from the heavy limb of an oak tree in the middle of the marsh, his thick neck stretched by hemp, his red hair shivering in the wind.

Some tried to call it murder and blame it on vanished Noel; there were plenty who recalled his hatred of the man. But his foreman at the company said Prudhomme had refused to go into the marsh for days, and the pharmacist revealed that he'd filled a prescription of strong sleeping pills for Prudhomme. General consensus was that the man had been afraid of something.

And who could they blame for the bulldozer whose engine suffered irreparable, impossible rust damage overnight? Or the fire that broke out at the offices of Marshwood Development, nearly killing a file clerk? Prudhomme's vice president told the local newspaper, "We're superstitious, but we're not stupid either. Marshwood Development has sold the entire parcel of land to the federal government to be turned into a wildlife sanctuary. It's a beauty of a tax writeoff." My father, an accountant at the paper, told us the man had actually said "a wet dream of a tax writeoff," and my mother nearly choked with laughter at the dinner table.

As for me and Bronwen—well, on the night before we had to return to school, we took a walk along the deserted main street of the town. We passed the doorway where Noel had shouted at Prudhomme, the drugstore where we had read horror comics and eaten ice cream, the school where Noel had taken his torment like a Stoic. We deliberately avoided Noel's empty house and the marsh near it. But as we were about to turn down the street that would return us home, Bronwen stopped and tilted her head. "Listen," she said.

We both listened. We stood together on the dark street corner and listened for a long time, until a cold wind began to run its fingers under our collars. Bronwen shivered and tucked her arm under mine. We went on our way, not speaking of what we had heard on the corner.

Far away, from the direction of the marsh, we had heard faint strains of eerie, lovely music.

MUSSOLINI AND THE AXEMAN'S JAZZ

Sarajevo, 1914

Stone turrets and crenelated columns loomed on either side of the Archduke's motorcade. The crowd parted before the open carriages, an indistinct blur of faces. Francis Ferdinand swallowed some of the unease that had been plaguing him all day: a bitter bile, a constant burn at the back of his throat.

It was his fourteenth wedding anniversary. Sophie sat beside him, a bouquet of scarlet roses at her bosom. There Serbs and Croats were a friendly crowd; as the heir apparent of Austria-Hungary, Francis Ferdinand stood to give them an equal voice in his empire. Besides, Sophie was a Slav, the daughter of a noble Czech family. Surely his marriage to a northern Slav had earned him the sympathy of these southern ones.

Yet the Archduke could not divest himself of the notion that there was a menacing edge to the throng. The occasional vivid detail—a sobbing baby, a flower tucked behind the ear of a beautiful woman—was lost before his eyes could fully register it. He glanced at Sophie. In the summer heat he could smell her sweat mingling with the *eau de parfum* she had dabbed on this morning.

She met his gaze and smiled faintly. Beneath her veil, her sweet face shone with perspiration. Back in Vienna, Sophie was snubbed by his court because she had been a lady in waiting when she met the Archduke, little better than a servant in their eyes. Francis Ferdinand's uncle, the old Emperor Francis Joseph, forbade the marriage. When the couple married anyway, Sophie was ostracized in a hundred ways. Francis Ferdinand knew it was sometimes a painful life for her, but she remained a steadfast wife, an exemplary mother.

For this reason he had brought her on the trip to Sarajevo. It was a routine army inspection for him, but for her it was a chance to be treated

with the royal honors she deserved. On this anniversary of their blessed union, Sophie would endure no subtle slights, no calculated cruelties.

The Archduke had never loved another human being. His parents were hazy memories, his uncle a shambling old man whose time had come and gone. Even his three children brought him more distraction than joy. The first time he laid eyes on Sophie, he discerned in her an empathy such as he had never seen before. Her features, her mannerisms, her soft ample body—all bespoke a comfort Francis Ferdinand had never formerly craved, but suddenly could not live without.

The four cars approached the Ćumuria Bridge. A pall of humidity hung over the water. The Archduke felt his skin steaming inside his heavy uniform, and his uneasiness intensified. He knew how defenseless they must look in the raised carriage, in the Serbian sun, the green feathers on his helmet drooping, Sophie's red roses beginning to wilt.

As they passed over the bridge, he saw an object arc out of the crowd and come hurtling toward him. In an instant his eye marked it as a crude hand bomb.

Francis Ferdinand raised his arm to protect Sophie and felt hot metal graze his flesh.

Gavrilo Princip's pistol left a smell on his palm like greasy coins, metallic and sour. It was a cheap thing from Belgium, as likely to blow his hand off as anything else. Still, it was all Gavrilo had, and he was the only one left to murder the villainous fool whose good intentions would crush Serbia.

He had known the other six would fail him. They were a young and earnest lot, always ready to sing the praises of a greater Serbia, but reluctant to look a man in the face and kill him. They spoke of the sanctity of human life, a short-sighted sentiment in Gavrilo's opinion. Human life was a fleeting thing, an expendable thing. The glory of a nation could endure through the ages. What his comrades failed to fully comprehend was that it must be oiled with human blood.

He raked his dirty hair back from his face and stared along the motorcade route. It looked as if the cars were finally coming. He took a deep breath. As the wet, sooty air entered his lungs, Gavrilo was seized with a racking cough that lasted a full minute. He had no handkerchief, so he

cupped his hand over his mouth. When he pulled it away, his fingers were speckled with fresh blood. He and his six comrades were all tubercular, and none of them expected to live past thirty. The fevers, the lassitude, the night sweats, the constant tickling itch deep in the chest—all these made the cyanide capsules they carried in their pockets a source of comfort rather than of dread.

Now the task was left to him. Mohammed and Nedjelko, the first two along the route, were carrying hand bombs. One of them had heaved his bomb—Gavrilo had seen it go flying—but the motorcade had continued toward City Hall with no apparent damage. His comrades between Ĉumuria Bridge and City Hall—Vasco, Cvijetko, Danilo, Trifko—had done nothing.

The Archduke's carriage moved slowly through the crowd, then braked and came to a standstill less than five feet from Gavrilo. This struck him as nothing short of a miracle, God telling him to murder the villains for the glory of Serbia.

He fired twice. The pistol did not blow his hand off. He saw Countess Sophie sag against her husband, saw blood on the Archduke's neck. The deed was done as well as he could do it. Gavrilo turned the pistol on himself, but before he could fire, it was knocked out of his hand. The crowd surged over him.

Gavrilo got his hand into his pocket, found the cyanide capsule and brought it to his mouth. Hundreds of hands were ripping at him, pummeling him. His teeth cracked the capsule open. The foul taste of bitter almonds flooded his mouth. He retched, swallowed, vomited, convulsed. The crowd would surely pull him to pieces. He felt his guts unmooring, his bones coming loose from their sockets, and still he could not die.

Sophie stood on the steps of City Hall between her husband and Fehim Effendi Curcić, the burgomaster of Sarajevo. Though Sophie and several of her attendants were bleeding from superficial cuts obtained from splinters of the bomb casing, and twelve spectators had been taken to hospital, Curcić obviously had no idea that the motorcade had come close to being blown up. He was surveying the crowd, a pleased look on his fat face. "Our hearts are filled with happiness—" he began.

Francis Ferdinand was white with anger. He grabbed the burgomaster's arm and shouted into his face. "One comes here for a visit and is received

with bombs! Mr. Mayor, what do you say?”

Curcić still didn’t understand. He smiled blandly at the Archduke and launched into his welcome speech again. The Archduke let him continue this time, looking disgusted. Never once did Curcić mention the bombing attempt.

Sophie gripped her husband’s hand. She could see Francis Ferdinand gradually pulling himself together. He was a man of inflexible opinions and sudden rages, painfully thin-skinned, capable of holding a grudge for eternity. He was like a spoiled child, bragging that he had shot five thousand stags, darkly hinting that he had brought down as many political enemies. But Sophie loved him. Not even her children fulfilled her vast need to be needed. This man did.

There was a delay while Francis Ferdinand sent a wire to the Emperor, who would have heard about the bomb. The Army wanted to continue with the day’s events, but the Archduke insisted upon first visiting the wounded spectators in the hospital.

He turned to Sophie. “You must not come. The risk is too great; there could be another attack.”

Fear clutched at her heart: of dying, of losing him. “No, I must go with you,” she told him, and Francis Ferdinand did not argue. When they entered their carriage again, Oskar Potiorek, the military governor, climbed in with them. His presence made Sophie feel a little safer.

The motorcade rolled back through the thronged streets. When they turned a corner, Sophie saw a sign marking Francis Joseph Street. Just as she noticed this, Potiorek sat up straighter and cried, “What’s this? We’ve taken the wrong way!”

The driver braked. The motorcade ground to a halt. Sophie felt something graze the top of her head, a sharp stinging sensation. The Archduke’s head snapped to one side. At the same time, Sophie felt something like a white-hot fist punch into her belly.

Through a haze of agony she reached for her husband. He leaned toward her, and a torrent of blood gushed from his mouth. She crumpled into his arms. Attendants swarmed around them, asked Francis Ferdinand if he was suffering. The last thing Sophie heard was her husband replying in a wet whisper, “It is nothing…it is nothing.”

They were both dead before the sun had reached its apex in the blazing sky.

New Orleans, 1918

New Orleans is commonly thought of as a French and Spanish town. “Creole,” a word now used to describe rich food of a certain seasoning and humans of a certain shade, first referred to the inevitable mixture of French and Spanish blood that began appearing several years after the city’s founding. The buildings of the Vieux Carré were certainly shaped and adorned by the ancestry of their builders: the Spanish courtyards and ironwork, the French cottages with their carved wooden shutters and pastel paint, the wholly European edifice of St. Louis Cathedral.

But, block by sagging block, the Vieux Carré was abandoned by these upwardly mobile people. By the turn of the century it had become a slum. A wave of Sicilian immigrants moved in. Many of them opened groceries, imported and sold the necessities of life. Some were honest businessmen, some were criminals; most made no such clear distinction. The *onorata società* offered them a certain amount of protection from the hoodlums who roamed the French Quarter. Naturally they required a payment for this service, and if a man found himself in a position to do them a favor—legal or otherwise—he had no choice but to oblige.

The Italians gradually branched out of the Quarter into every part of the city, and New Orleans became as fully an Italian town as a French or Spanish one.

Joseph D’Antonio, formerly Detective of the New Orleans Police Department, had been drinking on the balcony of his second-story hovel since late this afternoon. Bittersweet red wine, one bottle before the sun went down, another two since. His cells soaked it up like bread.

Two weeks in, this hot and sticky May portended a hellish summer. Even late at night, his balcony was the only place he could catch an occasional breath of air, usually tinged with the fetor of the Basin Canal nearby. Most nights, he had to force himself not to pass out here. These days, few things in his life were worse than waking up with a red-wine hangover and the morning sun in his eyes.

D’Antonio was forty-three. The circumstances of his early retirement had been as randomly cruel as the violence that presaged it. A crazed beat

cop named Mullen walked into headquarters one afternoon and gunned down Chief Inspector Jimmy Reynolds. In the confusion that followed, an innocent captain also named Mullen was shot dead. Someone had come charging in and asked what happened, and someone else was heard to yell, “Mullen killed Reynolds!”

The yeller was Joe D’Antonio. Unfortunately, the dead Mullen had been widely known to harbor a strong dislike for Italians in general and D’Antonio in particular. No one accused him directly of killing Mullen, but everyone wondered. His life became a hell of suspicious looks and nasty innuendo. Six months later, the new chief persuaded him to take early retirement.

D’Antonio leaned on the rickety railing and stared at the empty street. Until last year he had lived on the fringes of Storyville, the red light district. In the confusion of wartime patriotism, somebody had decided Storyville was a bad influence on Navy boys, and all the whorehouses were shut down. Now the buildings were dark and shabby, broken windows covered with boards or gaping like hungry mouths, lacework balconies sagging, opulent fixtures sold away or crumbling to dust.

D’Antonio could live without the whores, though some of them had been good enough gals. But he missed the music that had drifted up from Storyville every night, often drawing him out to some smoky little dive where he could drink and jazz away the hours till dawn. Players like Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and some new kid named Armstrong kept him sane throughout the bad months just after he left the force. He got to know some of the musicians, smoked reefer with them from time to time, warned them when undercover presence indicated a bust might be imminent.

Now they were gone. There were still jazz clubs in the city, but many of the players D’Antonio knew had moved to Chicago when Storyville closed down. They could record in Chicago, make money. And in Chicago, they didn’t have to sleep, drink, eat, and piss according to signs posted by white men.

Pissing sounded like a fine idea. He stood, steadied himself on the railing, and walked inside. The place had none of this modern indoor plumbing, and the odor of the slop jar filled the two airless rooms. Still, he’d never stooped so low as to piss off the balcony as some of his neighbors did, at least not that he could remember.

D’Antonio unbuttoned his fly and aimed into the jar. Behind him, the shutters on the French doors slammed shut with a report loud as a double-barreled shotgun in the airless night. His hand jerked. Urine sprayed the dingy wall.

When he’d finished pissing and cursing the freak wind, he wiped the wall with a dirty sock, then went back to the balcony doors. It was too hot in here with the shutters closed, and too dark. D’Antonio pushed them open again.

There was a man standing on the balcony, and the shutters passed right through him.

Francis Ferdinand scowled in annoyance. The first flesh-and-blood creature he’d met since his inglorious exit from this plane, and of course the fellow had to be stinking drunk.

Perhaps his drunkenness would make Francis Ferdinand’s job easier. Who could know? When one had to put himself together from whatever stray wisps of ectoplasm he could snatch out of the ether, it became increasingly difficult to fathom the minds of living men and women.

Joseph D’Antonio had a shock of black hair streaked with silver and a pale complexion that had gone florid from the wine. His dark eyes were comically wide, seeming to start from their sockets. “Hell, man, you’re a *ghost*! You’re a goddamned *ghost*, ain’tcha?”

English had never been one of his better languages, but Francis Ferdinand was able to understand D’Antonio perfectly. Even the drunken slur and the slight accent did not hinder him. He winced at the term. “A *wraith*, sir, if you please.”

D’Antonio waved a dismissive hand. The resulting current of air nearly wafted the Archduke off the balcony. “Wraith, ghost, whatever. S’all the same to me. Means I’ll be goin’ head first offa that balcony if I don’t get to bed soon. By accident…or on purpose? I dunno…”

Francis Ferdinand realized he would have to speak his piece at once, before the man slipped into maudlin incoherence. “Mr. D’Antonio, I do not come to you entirely by choice. You might say I have been dispatched. I died in the service of my country. I saw my beloved wife die, and pass into the Beyond. Yet I remain trapped in a sort of half-life. To follow her, I must do one more thing, and I must request your help.”

Francis Ferdinand paused, but D'Antonio remained silent. His eyes were alert, his aspect somewhat more sober than before.

"I must kill a man," the Archduke said at last.

D'Antonio's face twitched. Then he burst into sudden laughter. "That's a good one! You gotta kill somebody, but you can't, 'cause you're a goddam ghost!"

"Please, sir, I am a *wraith*! There are *class structures* involved here!"

"Sure. Whatever. Well, sorry, Duke. I handed over my gun when I left the force. Can't help you."

"You addressed me as 'Duke' just now, Mr. D'Antonio."

"Yeah, so? You're the Archduke, ain'tcha? The one who got shot at the beginning of the war?"

Francis Ferdinand was stunned. He had expected to have to explain everything to the man: his own useless assassination; the ensuing bedlam into which Europe had tumbled, country after country; the dubious relevance of these events to others in New Orleans. He was glad to discover that, at least in one respect, he had underestimated D'Antonio.

"Yeah, I know who you are. I might look like an ignorant wop, but I read the papers. Besides, there's a big old bullet hole in your neck."

Startled, the Archduke quickly patched the wound.

"Then, sir, that is one less thing I must explain to you. You have undoubtedly heard that I was murdered by the Serbs. This is the first lie. I was murdered by Sicilians."

"But the men they caught—"

"Were Serbs, yes. They were also dupes. The plot was set in motion by your countrymen; specifically, by a man called Cagliostro. Perhaps you've heard of him."

"Some kind of magician?"

"A mage, yes. Also a doctor, a swindler, a forger, and a murderer. He is more than a century old, yet retains the appearance of a man of thirty. A wicked, dangerous man.

"He was born Giuseppe Balsamo in Palermo, 1743. By the time he began his scourge of Europe, he had dubbed himself Cagliostro, an old family name. He travelled the continent selling charms, potions, elixirs of youth. Some of these may have been genuine, as he himself ceased to age at this time.

"He also became a Freemason. Are you familiar with them as well?"

“Not particularly.”

“They are a group of powerful mages hell-bent on controlling the world. They erect heathen temples in which they worship themselves and their accomplishments. Cagliostro formed his own ‘Egyptian Order’ and claimed to be thousands of years old already, reminiscing about his dalliances with Christ and various Pharaohs. It was power he sought, of course, though he claimed to work only for the ‘Brotherhood of Man.’

“At the peak of his European success, he became entangled in the famous scandal of Marie Antoinette’s diamond necklace. It nearly brought him down. He was locked in the Bastille, then forced to leave Paris in disgrace. He wandered back through the European cities that had once welcomed him, finding scant comfort. It has been rumored that he died in a dungeon in Rome, imprisoned for practices offensive to the Christian church.

“This is not so. His Masonic ‘brothers’ failed him for a time, but ultimately they removed him from the dungeon, whisked him out from under the noses of the French revolutionary armies who wished to make him a hero, and smuggled him off to Egypt.

“The practices he perfected there are unspeakable.

“Fifty years later, still appearing a young and vital man, he returned to Italy. He spent the next half century assembling a new ‘Egyptian Order’ of the most brilliant men he could find. With a select few, he shared his elixirs.

“Just after the turn of the century, he met a young journalist named Benito Mussolini, who called himself an ‘apostle of violence’ but had no direction. Cagliostro has guided Mussolini’s career since then. In 1915, Mussolini’s newspaper helped urge Italy into war.”

D’Antonio started violently. “Aw, come on! You’re not gonna tell me these Egyptian-Dago-Freemasons started the war.”

“Sir, that is exactly what I am going to tell you. They also ordered my wife’s death, and my own, and that of my empire.”

“Why in hell would they do that?”

“I cannot tell you. They are evil men. My uncle, the Emperor Francis Joseph, discovered all this inadvertently. He was a cowardly old fool who would have been afraid to tell anyone. Nevertheless, they hounded him into virtual retirement, where he died.”

“And told you all this?”

“He had no one else to talk to. Nor did I.”

“Where’s your wife?”

“Sophie was not required to linger here. We were.”

“Why?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“You keep saying that. Does it mean you don’t know, or you aren’t *allowed* to tell me?”

Francis Ferdinand paused. After a moment, D’Antonio nodded. “I see how it is. So I’m supposed to dance for you like Mussolini does for Cagliostro?”

The Archduke did not understand the question. He waited to see if D’Antonio would rephrase it, but the man remained silent. Finally Francis Ferdinand said, “Cagliostro still controls Mussolini, and means to shape him into the most vicious ruler Europe has ever known. But Cagliostro is no longer in Italy. He is here in New Orleans.”

“Oh-ho. And you want me to kill him for you, is that it?”

“Yes, but I haven’t finished. Cagliostro is in New Orleans—*but we don’t know who he is.*”

“*We?* Who’s *we?*”

“Myself, my uncle.”

“No one else?”

“No one else you would care to know about, sir.”

D’Antonio sagged in his chair. “Yeah, well, forget it. I’m not killin’ anybody. Find some other poor dupe.”

“Are you certain, Mr. D’Antonio?”

“Very certain.”

“Very well.” Francis Ferdinand drifted backward through the balcony railing and vanished in midair.

“Wait!” D’Antonio was halfway out of his chair by the time he realized the wraith was gone. He sank back, his brain seasick in his skull from all the talk of mages and murders, elixirs and dungeons, and the famous scandal of Marie Antoinette’s diamond necklace—whatever the hell that was.

“Why me?” he murmured into the hot night. But the night made no reply.

Cagliostro stood behind his counter and waited on the last customer of the day, an old lady buying half a pound of salt cod. When she had gone, he locked the door and had his supper: a small loaf of bread, a thick wedge of provolone, a few olives chopped with garlic. He no longer ate the flesh of creatures, though he must sell it to maintain the appearance of a proper Italian grocery.

Above his head hung glossy loops of sausage and salami, rafters of wind-dried ham with pancetta, luminous globes of caciocavallo cheese. In the glass case were pots of creamy ricotta, stuffed artichokes, orbs of mozzarella in milk, bowls of shining olives and capers preserved in brine. On the neat wooden shelves were jars of candied fruit, almonds, pine nuts, aniseed, and a rainbow of assorted sweets. There were tall wheels of parmesan coated in funereal black wax, cruets of olive oil and vinegar, pickled cucumbers and mushrooms, flat tins containing anchovies, calamari, octopus. Enormous burlap sacks of red beans, fava beans, chickpeas, rice, couscous, and coffee threatened to spill their bounty onto the spotless tile floor. Pastas of every shape, size, and color were arranged in an elaborate display of bins facing the counter.

The aroma of the place was a balm to Cagliostro's ancient soul. He carried the world's weight on his back every day; he had pledged his very life to the furthering of the Brotherhood of Man; still, that did not mean he could shirk small duties. He fed the families of his neighborhood. When they could not pay, he fed them on credit, and when there was no hope of recovering the credit, he fed them for free.

He had caused death, to be sure. He had caused the deaths of the Archduke and his wife for several reasons, most importantly the malignant forces that hung over Europe like black clouds heavy with rain. Such a rain could mean the death of millions, hundreds of millions. The longer it was allowed to stagnate, the more virulent it would grow. It had needed some spark to release it, some event whose full significance was hidden at first, then gradually revealed. The assassination in Sarajevo had been that event, easy enough to arrange by providing the dim-witted Serbian anarchists with encouragement and weapons.

His name was synonymous with elaborate deception, and not undeservedly so. But some of his talents were genuine. In his cards and

scrying-bowl Cagliostro could read the future, and the future looked very dark.

He, of course, would change all that.

This war was nearly over. It had drained some of the poison from those low-hanging clouds, allowed Europe to shatter and purge itself. But it had not purged enough; there would be another great war inside of two decades. In that one, his boy Benito would send thousands of innocent men to their useless deaths. But that was not as bad as what could be.

Though he had never killed a man with his own hands, Cagliostro bitterly felt the loss of the human beings who died as a result of his machinations. They were his brothers and sisters; he mourned each one as he would a lovely temple he had never seen, upon hearing it had been demolished. He could not accept that their sacrifice was a natural thing, but he had come to understand that it was necessary.

Mussolini was more than a puppet; he was a powerful orator and propagandist who would learn to yank his followers in any direction that pleased him. But he was unbalanced, ultimately no better than a fool, ignorant of the Mysteries, incapable of seeing them when a few of the topmost veils were pulled aside. He would make an excellent pawn, and he would die believing he had engineered his own destiny.

The only reason he could be allowed into power was to prevent something far worse.

Cagliostro had seen another European tyrant in his cards and his bowl, a man who made Mussolini look like a painted tin soldier. Mussolini was motivated exclusively by power, and that was bad enough; but this other creature was a bottomless well of hatred. Given the chance, he would saturate all creation with his vitriol. Millions would die like vermin, and their corpses would choke the world. The scrying-water had shown terrifying factories built especially for disposal of the dead, ovens hot enough to reduce bone to ash, black smokestacks belching greasy smoke into a charred orange sky.

Cagliostro did not yet know this tyrant’s precise identity, but he believed that the man would come from Austria and rule Germany. Two more good reasons for the Archduke’s death: Francis Ferdinand would have made a powerful ally for such a man.

Cagliostro did not think he could altogether stop this tyrant. He had not foreseen it in time; he had been occupied with other matters. It was always

thus when a man wished to save the world: he never knew where to look first, let alone where to begin.

Still, he believed he could stop the tyrant short of global domination, and he believed Mussolini was his key. Members of the Order in Italy were grooming him for Prime Minister. The title would unlock every door in Europe. If they could arrange for Mussolini to become the tyrant's ally, perhaps they could also ensure that Mussolini would in some way cause the tyrant's downfall.

Cagliostro finished his simple supper, collected the day's receipts, and turned off the lights. In the half-darkness he felt his way back to the small living quarters behind the store, where he sat up reading obscure volumes and writing long letters in a florid hand until nearly dawn. Over the past century, he had learned to thrive on very little sleep.

D'Antonio was sitting up in bed, back propped against the wooden headboard, bare legs sprawled atop the sweat-rumpled coverlet, bottle nestled between his thighs. The Archduke appeared near the sink. D'Antonio jumped, slopped wine onto the coverlet, cursed. "You gotta make me stain something every time you show up?"

"You need have no fear of me."

"No, you just want me to murder somebody for you. Why should that scare me?"

"It should not, sir. What should scare you is the prospect of a world ruled by Cagliostro and his Order."

"That guy again. Find him yet?"

"We know he came to New Orleans before 1910. We know he is living as an Italian grocer. But he has covered his tracks so successfully that we cannot determine his precise identity. We have a number of candidates."

"That's good." D'Antonio nodded, pretended to look thoughtful. "So you just gonna kill all of 'em, or what?"

"I cannot kill anyone, sir. I cannot even lift a handkerchief. That is why I require your help."

"I thought I told you last time, Duke. My services are unavailable. Now kindly fuck off."

"I feared you would say that. You will not change your mind?"

"Not a chance."

“Very well.”

D’Antonio expected the wraith to vanish as it had last time. Instead, Francis Ferdinand seemed to break apart before his eyes. The face dissolved into a blur, the fingers elongated into smoke-swirls; then there was only a man-shaped shimmer of gossamer strands where the Archduke had been.

When D’Antonio breathed in, they all came rushing toward him.

He felt clammy filaments sliding up his nose, into his mouth, into the lubricated crevices of his eye sockets. They filled his lungs, his stomach; he felt exploratory tendrils venturing into his intestines. A profound nausea gripped him. It was like being devoured alive by grave-worms. The wraith’s consciousness was saturating his own, blotting him out like ink spilled on a letter.

“*I offered you the chance to act of your own free will*,” Francis Ferdinand said. The voice was a hideous papery whisper inside his skull now. “*Since you declined, I am given no choice but to help you along.*”

#

Joseph Maggio awoke to the sound of his wife choking on her own blood. Great hot spurts of it bathed his face. A tall figure stood by the bed, instrument of death in his upraised hand. Maggio recognized it as the axe from his own backyard woodpile, gleaming with fresh gore. It fell again with a sound like a cleaver going into a beef neckbone, and his wife was silent.

Maggio struggled to sit up as the killer circled to his side of the bed. He did not recognize the man. For a moment their eyes locked, and Maggio thought, *That man is already dead.*

“Cagliostro?” It was a raspy whisper, possibly German-accented, though the man looked Italian.

Wildly, Maggio shook his head. “No, no sir, my name’s Joseph Maggio, I just run a little grocery and I never heard of no Cagli-whoever… oh Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph please don’t hit me with that thing—”

The blade glittered in a deadly arc. Maggio sprawled halfway off the bed, blinded by a sudden wash of his own blood. The axe fell again and he heard his own skull crunching, felt blade squeak against bone as the killer

wrenched it out. Another searing cut, then another, until a merciful blow severed his jugular and he died in a red haze.

It was found that the killer had gained access to the Maggios' home by chiseling out a panel in the back door. The chisel had belonged to Joseph Maggio, as had the axe, which was found in a pool of blood on the steps. People all over New Orleans searched their yards for axes and chisels, and locked away these potential implements of Hell.

A strange phrase was found chalked on the pavement a block from the Maggios' house: "Mrs. Maggio is going to sit up tonight, just like Mrs. Tony." Its significance has not been discovered to this day.

Maggio's two brothers were arrested on the grounds that the Maggios were Sicilians, and Sicilians were prone to die in family vendettas. They were released by virtue of public drunkenness—they had been out celebrating the younger one's draft notice on the night of the murders, and had staggered home scarcely able to move, let alone lift an axe.

The detective in charge of the case was shot to death by a burglar one week after the murders. The investigation languished. News of the Romanov family's murder by Bolsheviks in Russia eclipsed the Maggio tragedy. The temperature climbed as June wore on.

"*I detect Cagliostro's influences still at work on this plane*," the Archduke said. "*We must move on to the next candidate*."

Deep inside his own ectoplasm-snared brain, which the wraith kept docile with wine except when he needed to use the body, D'Antonio could only manage a feeble moan of protest.

A clear tropical dawn broke over New Orleans as John Zanca parked his wagon of fresh breads and cakes in front of Luigi Donatello's grocery. He could not tell whether the grocer and his wife were awake yet, so he decided to take their order around to the back door. He gathered up a fragrant armful of baked goods still warm from the oven and carried them down the narrow alley that led to the Donatellos' living quarters.

When he saw the back door with its lower left panel neatly chiseled out, his arms went limp. Cakes and loaves rained on the grass at his feet.

After a moment, Zanca stepped forward—careful not to crush any of the baked goods—and knocked softly on the door. He did not want to do so, but there seemed nothing else to do. When it swung open, he nearly screamed.

Before him stood Luigi Donatello, his face crusted with blood, his hair and moustache matted with it. Zanca could see three big gashes in his skull, white edges of bone, wet gray tissue swelling through the cracks. How could the man still be standing?

"My God," moaned Donatello. "My God."

Behind him, Zanca saw Mrs. Donatello sprawled on the floor. The top of her head was a gory porridge. The slender stem of her neck was nearly cloven in two.

"My God. My God. My God."

John Zanca closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for the Donatellos' souls and his own.

The newspapers competed with one another for the wildest theory regarding the Axeman, as the killer came to be known. He was a Mafia executioner, and the victims were fugitives from outlaw justice in Sicily. He was a vigilante patriot, and the victims were German spies masquerading as Italian grocers. He was an evil spirit. He was a voodoo priest. He was a woman. He was a policeman.

The Italian families of New Orleans, particularly those in the grocery business, barricaded their doors and fed their dogs raw meat to make them bloodthirsty. These precautions did not stop them from lying awake in the small hours, clutching a rosary or perhaps a revolver, listening for the scrape of the Axeman's chisel.

In high summer, when the city stank of oyster shells and ancient sewers, the killer returned. Two teenage sisters, Mary and Pauline Romano, saw their uncle butchered in his own bed. They could only describe the man as "dark, tall, wearing a dark suit and a black slouch hat."

Italian families with enemies began finding axes and chisels dropped in their yards, more like cruel taunts than actual threats. Some accused other members of their families. Some said the families had brought it upon

themselves. Tempers flared in the sodden August heat, and many killings were done with weapons other than axes. Men with shotguns sat guard over their sleeping families, nodding off, jerking awake at the slightest noise. A grocer shot his own dog; another nearly shot his own wife.

The city simmered in its own prejudice and terror, a piquant gumbo.

But the Axeman would not strike again that year.

D'Antonio came awake with a sensation like rising through cool water into sunlight. He tried to move his hands: they moved. He tried to open his eyes: the ceiling appeared, cracked and water-stained. Was it possible? Was the fucking monster really *gone*?

"Duke?" he whispered aloud into the empty room. His lips were dry, wine-parched. "Hey, Duke? You in there?"

To his own ears he sounded plaintive, as if he missed the parasitic murdering creature. But the silence in his head confirmed it. The wraith was gone.

He stared at his hands, remembering everything he had seen them do. How ordinary they looked, how incapable of swinging a sharp blade and destroying a man's brain, a woman's brain. For a long time he sat on the edge of the bed studying the beds of his nails and the creases in his palms, vaguely surprised that they were not caked with blood.

Eventually he looked down at himself and found that he was wearing only a filthy pair of trousers. He stripped them off, sponged himself to a semblance of cleanliness with the stale water in the basin, slicked his hair back and dressed in fresh clothes. He left his apartment without locking the door and set off in a random direction.

D'Antonio wandered hatless in the August sun for an hour or more. When he arrived at the *States* newspaper office, his face was streaming with sweat, red as a boiled crawfish. He introduced himself to the editor as a retired police detective, an expert on both Italians and murderers, and gave the following statement:

"The Axeman is a modern Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A criminal of this type may be a respectable, law-abiding citizen when he is his normal self. Compelled by an impulse to kill, he must obey this urge. Like Jack the Ripper, this sadist may go on with his periodic outbreaks until his death. For months, even for years, he may be normal, then go on another rampage.

It is a mistake to blame the Mafia. The Mafia never attacks women as this murderer has done."

He left the *States* office with several people staring bemusedly after him, but they printed the interview in its entirety.

After that, he lived his life much as he had been doing before the wraith's first visit. Armistice Day brought throngs of joyous revelers into the streets, as well as a blessed wave of cool weather; it had stayed sweltering through October. The war was over, and surely the wraith would never come back and make him do those things again.

He could not forget the organic vibration that ran up his arms as blade buried itself in bone.

In fact, he dreamed about it almost every night.

Francis Ferdinand returned in the spring of 1919.

He did not muck about with appearances this time, but simply materialized inside D'Antonio's head. D'Antonio collapsed, clawing at his temples.

"*He deceived me for a time, but now I know he still walks this earth,*" said the wraith. "*We will find him.*"

D'Antonio lay curled on his side, blinded by tears of agony, wishing for the comforts of the womb or the grave.

Giacomo Lastanza was a powerful man, but he had been no match for the fiend in his bedroom. Now he lay on the floor with his head split as cleanly as a melon, and his wife Rosalia cowered in a corner of the room clutching her two-year-old daughter, Mary. Mary was screaming, clutching at her mother's long black hair. As the Axeman turned away from her husband's body, Rosalia began to scream too.

"Not my baby! Please, Holy Mother of God, not my baby!"

The axe fell. Mary's little face seemed to crack open like an egg. Rosalia was unconscious before her skull felt the blade's first kiss.

D'Antonio lay naked on the floor. The apartment was a wasteland of dirty clothes and empty wine bottles. But his body was relatively sober for

once—they'd run out of money—and as a result he was sharp enough to be carrying on an argument with the wraith.

"Why in hell do we have to kill the women? You can't be worried one of *them* is Cagliostro."

"He has consorted with a number of dangerous women. When we find him, his wife will bear killing also."

"And until then, you don't mind killing a few innocent ones?"

"It is necessary."

"What about that little baby?"

"If it had been Cagliostro's daughter, he would have raised her to be as wicked as himself."

D'Antonio got control of one fist and weakly pounded the floor with it.

"You goddam monster—you're just gonna keep killing people, and sooner or later I'll get caught and rot in prison. Or fry in the chair. And you'll go on your merry way and find some other poor sap to chase down that shadow of yours."

"The next one must be him! He is the last one on the list!"

"Fuck the list."

A bolt of excruciating pain shot through D'Antonio's head, and he decided to drop the argument.

Cagliostro was reading by candlelight when he heard the chisel scraping at his door. He smiled and turned a page.

The creature crept into his room, saw him in his chair with his head bent over a book. When it was ten feet away, Cagliostro looked up. When it was five feet away, it froze in mid-motion, restrained by the protective circle he had drawn.

By looking into its eyes, he knew everything about Joseph D'Antonio and the Archduke Francis Ferdinand. But the creature upon which he gazed now was neither D'Antonio nor the Archduke; this was a twisted amalgamation of the two, and it could only be called the Axeman.

He smiled at the creature, though its eyes blazed with murderous rage. "Yes, poor Archduke, it is I. And you will not harm me. In fact, I fear I must harm you yet again. If only you had accepted the necessity of your death the first time, you would be Beyond with your beloved Sophie now.

“No, don’t think you can desert your stolen body as it lies dying. You’ll stay in there, my boy. My magic circle will see to that!” Cagliostro beamed; he was enjoying this immensely. “Yes, yes, I know about unfortunate ex-Detective D’Antonio trapped in there. But why do you think it was so easy for the Duke to take hold of your body, Mr. D’Antonio, and make it do the terrible things it did? Perhaps because you care not at all for your fellow human beings? ‘When they came for the Jews, I did nothing, for I was not a Jew’…ah, forgive me. An obscure reference to a future that may never be. And you will both die to help prevent it.”

He reached beneath the cushion of his armchair, removed a silver revolver with elaborate engraving on the butt and barrel, aimed it carefully, and put a ball in the Axeman’s tortured brain.

Then he put his book aside, went to his desk, and took up his pen.

The letter was published in the *Times-Picayune* the next day.

Hell, March 13, 1919

Editor of the Times-Picayune
New Orleans, La.

Esteemed Mortal:

They have never caught me and they never will. They have never seen me, for I am invisible, even as the ether that surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a fell demon from the hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the Axeman.

When I see fit, I shall come again and claim other victims.

I alone know whom they shall be. I shall leave no clue except my bloody axe, besmeared with the blood and brains of he who I have sent below to keep me company.

If you wish, you may tell the police to be careful not to rile me.

Of course, I am a reasonable spirit. I take no offense at the way they have conducted their investigations in the past. In fact, they have been so utterly stupid as to amuse not only me, but His Satanic Majesty, Francis Joseph, etc. But tell them to beware. Let them not try to discover what I am, for it were better that they were never born than to incur the wrath of the Axeman. I don't think there is any need for such a warning, for I feel sure the police will always dodge me, as they have in the past. They are wise and know how to keep away from all harm.

Undoubtedly, you Orleanians think of me as a most horrible murderer, which I am, but I could be much worse if I wanted to. If I wished, I could pay a visit to your city every night. At will I could slay thousands of your best citizens, for I am in close relationship with the Angel of Death.

Now, to be exact, at 12:15 (earthly time) on next Tuesday night, I am going to pass over New Orleans. In my infinite mercy, I am going to make a little proposition to you people.

Here it is:

I am very fond of jazz music, and I swear by all the devils in the nether region that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for you people. One thing is certain and that is that some of those people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe.

Well, I am cold and crave the warmth of my native Tartarus, and as it is about time that I leave your earthly home, I will cease my discourse. Hoping that thou wilt publish this, that it may go well with thee, I have

been, am, and will be the worst spirit that ever existed either in fact or realm of fancy.

THE AXEMAN

Tuesday was Saint Joseph's Night, always a time of great excitement among Italians in New Orleans. This year it reached a fever pitch. The traditional altars made of a hundred or more kinds of food were built, admired, dismantled, and distributed to the poor; lucky fava beans were handed out by the fistful; the saint was petitioned and praised. Still, St. Joseph's Night of 1919 would remain indelibly fixed in New Orleans memory as "The Axeman's Jazz Night."

Cafés and mansions on St. Charles blazed with the melodies of live jazz bands. Those who could not afford to pay musicians fed pennies into player pianos. A popular composer had written a song called "The Mysterious Axeman's Jazz, or, Don't Scare Me, Papa." Banjo, guitar, and mandolin players gathered on the levees to send jazz music into the sky, so the Axeman would be sure to hear it as he passed over. By midnight, New Orleans was a cacophony of sounds, all of them swinging.

Cagliostro walked the streets for most of the night, marveling (if not actively congratulating himself) at how completely he had brought the city together, and how gay he had made it in the process. No one so much as glanced at him: few people were on the streets, and Cagliostro had a talent for making himself invisible.

He had left the Axeman's corpse locked in the back of the house where it wouldn't spoil the groceries. First, of course, he had bludgeoned the face into unrecognizable mush with the Axeman's own axe. Everything that suggested the murdered man might be someone other than "Mike Pepitone," simple Italian grocer, was in the satchel Cagliostro carried with him.

On the turntable of his phonograph, as a final touch, he had left a recording of "'Nearer My God To Thee."

When the jazz finally began to die down, he walked to the docks and signed onto a freighter headed for Egypt. There were any number of wonderful things he hadn’t gotten around to learning last time.

Italy, 1945

Toward the end, Mussolini lived in an elaborate fantasy world constructed by the loyal sycophants who still surrounded him. Whole cities in Italy were sanitized for his inspection, the cheering crowds along his parade routes supplemented by paid extras. When Hitler visited Rome, he too was deceived by the coat of sparkle on the decay, the hand-picked Aryan soldiers, the sheer bravado of *Il Duce.*

He believed he had cost Hitler the war. Germany lost its crucial Russian campaign after stopping to rescue the incompetent Italian army in Albania. Hitler had believed in the power and glory of Italy, and Mussolini had failed him.

Now he had been forced into exile on Lake Garda. He was a failure, his brilliant regime was a failure, and there were no more flunkies to hide these painful truths. He kept voluminous diaries in which he fantasized that his position in history would be comparable to Napoleon or Christ. His mistress Claretta lived nearby in a little villa, his only comfort.

On April 25, Germany caved in to the Allies. The Italian people, the ones he had counted on to save him with their loyalty, turned against him. Mussolini and Claretta fled, making for Switzerland.

A few fanatical companions attempted to help them escape by subterfuge, but they were arrested by partisans on the north shore of Lake Como, discovered hiding in a German truck, cringing inside German coats and helmets. They were shot against the iron gate of an exquisite villa, and their bodies were taken to Milan and strung up by the heels to demonstrate the evils of Fascism.

All in service of the brotherhood of man.

SELF-MADE MAN

Justin had read *Dandelion Wine* seventeen times now, but he still hated to see it end. He always hated endings.

He turned the last page of the book and sat for several minutes in the shadows of his bedroom, cradling the old thumbed paperback by Ray Bradbury, marvelling at the world he held in his hands. The hot sprawl of the city outside was forgotten; he was still lost in the cool green Byzantium of 1928.

Within these tattered covers, dawning realization of his own mortality might turn a boy into a poet, not a dark machine of destruction. People only died after saying to each other all the things that needed to be said, and the summer never truly ended so long as those bottles gleamed down cellar, full of the distillate of memory.

For Justin, the distillate of memory was a bitter vintage. The summer of 1928 seemed impossibly long ago, beyond imagining, forty years before blasted sperm met cursed egg to make him. When he put the book aside and looked at the dried blood under his fingernails, it seemed even longer.

An artist who doesn't read is no artist at all, he had scribbled in a notebook he once tried to keep, but abandoned after a few weeks, sick of his own thoughts. *Books are the key to other minds, sure as bodies are the key to other souls. Reading a good book is a lot like sinking your fingers up to the second knuckle in someone's brain.*

In the world of the story, no one left before it was time. Characters in a book never went away; all you had to do was open the book again and there they'd be, right where you left them. He wished live people were so easy to hold onto.

You could hold onto *parts* of them, of course; you could even make them part of yourself. That was easy. But to keep a whole person with you forever, to stop just one person from leaving or gradually disintegrating as they always did…to just *hold* someone. *All* of someone.

There might be ways. There had to be ways.

Even in Byzantium, a Lonely One stalked and preyed.

Justin was curled up against the headboard of his bed, a bloodstained comforter bunched around his bare legs. This was his favorite reading spot. He glanced at the nightstand, which held a Black & Decker electric drill, a pair of scissors, a roll of paper towels, and a syringe full of chlorine bleach. The drill wasn't plugged in yet. He closed his eyes and allowed a small slow shudder to run through his body, part dread, part desire.

There were screams carved on the air of his room, vital fluids dried deep within his mattress, whole lives sewn into the lining of his pillow, to be taken out and savored later. There was always time, so long as you didn't let your memories get away. He had kept most of his. In fact, he'd kept seventeen; all but the first two, and those he didn't want.

Justin's father had barely seen him out of the womb before disappearing into the seamy nightside of Los Angeles. His mother raised him on the continent's faulty rim, in an edging-toward-poor neighborhood of a city that considered its poor a kind of toxic waste: ceaselessly and unavoidably churned out by progress, hard to store or dispose of, foul-smelling and ugly and dangerous. Their little stucco house was at the edge of a vast slum, and Justin's dreams were peppered with gunfire, his play permeated with the smell of piss and garbage. He was often beaten bloody just for being a scrawny white boy carrying a book. His mother never noticed his hands scraped raw on concrete, or the thin crust of blood that often formed between his oozing nose and mouth by the time he got home.

She had married again and moved to Reno as soon as Justin turned eighteen, as soon as she could turn her painfully awkward son out of the house. *You could be a nice-looking young man if you cleaned yourself up. You're smart, you could get a good job and make money. You could have girlfriends*, as if looks and money and girlfriends were the sweetest things he could ever dream of.

Her new husband had been a career Army man who looked at Justin the way he looked at their ragged old sofa, as leftover trash from her former life. Now they were both ten years dead, their bones mummified or scattered by animals somewhere in the Nevada desert, in those beautiful blasted lands. Only Justin knew where.

He'd shot his stepfather first, once in the back of the head with his own Army service pistol, just to see the surprise on his mother's face as brain and bone exploded across the glass top of her brand-new dinner table, as

her husband's blood dripped into the mashed potatoes and the meat loaf, rained into her sweating glass of tea. He thought briefly that this surprise was the strongest emotion he had ever seen there. The sweetest, too. Then he pointed the gun at it and watched it blossom into chaos.

Justin remembered clearing the table, noticing that one of his mother's eyes had landed in her plate, afloat on a thin patina of blood and grease. He tilted the plate a little and the glistening orb rolled onto the floor. It made a small satisfying squelch beneath the heel of his shoe, a sound he felt more than heard.

No one ever knew he had been out of California. He drove their gas-guzzling luxury sedan into the desert, dumped them and the gun. He returned to L.A. by night, by Greyhound bus, drinking bitter coffee and reading at rest stops, watching the country unspool past his window, the starlit desert and highway and small sleeping towns, the whole wide-open landscape folding around him like an envelope or a concealing hand. He was safe among other human flotsam. No one ever remembered his face. No one considered him capable of anything at all, let alone murder.

After that he worked and read and drank compulsively, did little else for a whole year. He never forgot that he was capable of murder, but he thought he had buried the urge. Then one morning he woke up with a boy strewn across his bed, face and chest battered in, abdomen torn wide open. Justin's hands were still tangled in the glistening purple stew of intestines. From the stains on his skin he could see that he had rubbed them all over his body, maybe rolled in them.

He didn't remember meeting the boy, didn't know how he had killed him or opened his body like a big wet Christmas present, or why. But he kept the body until it started to smell, and then he cut off the head, boiled it until the flesh was gone, and kept the skull. After that it never stopped again. They had all been boys, all young, thin, and pretty: everything the way Justin liked it. Weapons were too easy, too impersonal, so he drugged them and strangled them. Like Willy Wonka in the technicolor bowels of his chocolate factory, *he* was the music maker, and *he* was the dreamer of dreams.

It was a dark and lonely revelry, to be sure. But so was writing; so was painting or learning music. So, he supposed, was all art when you penetrated to its molten core. He didn't know if killing was art, but it was the only creative thing he had ever done.

He got up, slid *Dandelion Wine* back into its place on his crowded bookshelf, and left the bedroom. He put his favorite CD on shuffle and crossed his small apartment to the kitchenette. A window beside the refrigerator looked out on a brick wall. Frank Sinatra was singing “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”

Justin opened the refrigerator and took out a package wrapped in foil. Inside was a ragged cut of meat as large as a dinner plate, deep red, tough and fibrous. He selected a knife from the jumble of filthy dishes in the sink and sliced off a piece of meat the size of his palm. He wasn’t very hungry, but he needed something in his stomach to soak up the liquor he’d be drinking soon.

Justin heated oil in a skillet, sprinkled the meat with salt, laid it in the sizzling fat and cooked it until both sides were brown and the bottom of the pan was awash with fragrant juices. He slid the meat onto a saucer, found a clean fork in the silverware drawer, and began to eat his dinner standing at the counter.

The meat was rather tough, but it tasted wonderful, oily and salty with a slight undertone of musk. He felt it breaking down in the acids of his saliva and his stomach, felt its proteins joining with his cells and becoming part of him. That was fine. But after tonight he would have something better. A person who lived and stayed with him, whose mind belonged to him. A homemade zombie. Justin knew it was possible, if only he could destroy the right parts of the brain. If a drill and a syringeful of bleach didn’t work, he would try something else next time.

The night drew like a curtain across the window, stealing his wall view brick by brick. Sinatra’s voice was as smooth and sweet as cream. *Got you…deep in the heart of me*…Justin nodded reflectively. The meat left a delicately metallic flavor on his tongue, one of the myriad tastes of love. Soon it would be time to go out.

Apart from the trip to Reno and the delicious wallow in the desert, Justin had never left Los Angeles. He longed to drive out into the desert, to find again the ghost towns and nuclear moonscapes he had so loved in Nevada. But he never had. You needed a car to get out there. If you didn’t have a car in L.A., you might as well curl up and die. Los Angeles was a city with an enormous central nervous system, but no brain.

Since being fired from his job at an orange juice plant for chronic absenteeism—too many bodies demanding his time, requiring that he cut

them up, preserve them, consume them—Justin wasn't even sure how much longer he would be able to afford the apartment. But he didn't see how he could move out with things the way they were in here. The place was a terrible mess. His neighbors had started complaining about the smell.

Justin decided not to think about all that now. He still had a little money saved, and a city bus would get him from his Silver Lake apartment to the garish carnival of West Hollywood; that much he knew. It had done so countless times.

If he was lucky, he'd be bringing home company.

#

Suko ran fingers the color of sandalwood through haphazardly cut black hair, painted his eyes with stolen drugstore kohl, and grinned at himself in the cracked mirror over the sink. He fastened a string of thrift-shop beads round his neck, studied the effect of the black plastic against torn black cotton and smooth brown skin, then added a clay amulet of the Buddha and a tiny wooden penis, both strung on leather thongs.

These he had purchased among the dim stalls at Wat Rajanada, the amulet market near Klong Saensaep in Bangkok. The amulet was to protect him against accidents and malevolent ghosts. The penis was to increase his potency, to make sure whoever he met up with tonight would have a good time. It was supposed to be worn on a string around his waist, but the first few times he'd done that, his American lovers gave him strange looks.

The amulets were the last thing Suko bought with Thai money before boarding a California-bound jet and bidding farewell to his sodden homeland, most likely forever. He'd had to travel a long way from Patpong Road to get them, but he didn't know whether one could buy magical amulets in America. Apparently one could: attached to his beads had once been a round medallion stamped with an exaggerated Negro face and the word ZULU. He'd lost the medallion on a night of drunken revelry, which was as it should be. *Mai pen rai. No problem.*

Suko was nineteen. His full name was unpronounceable by American tongues, but he didn't care. American tongues could do all sorts of other things for him. This he had learned at fourteen, after hitching a midnight

ride out of his home village, a place so small and so poor that it appeared on no map foreign eyes would ever see.

His family had always referred to the city by its true name, Krung Thep, the Great City of Angels. Suko had never known it by any other name until he arrived there. Krung Thep was only an abbreviation for the true name, which was more than thirty syllables long. For some reason, *farangs* had never gotten used to this. They all called it Bangkok, a name like two sharp handclaps.

In the streets, the harsh reek of exhaust fumes was tinged with a million subtler perfumes: jasmine, raw sewage, grasshoppers frying in peppered oil, the odor of ripe durian fruit that was like rotting flesh steeped in thick sweet cream. The very air seemed spritzed with alcohol, soaked with neon and the juices of sex.

He found his calling on Patpong 3, a block-long strip of gay bars and nightclubs in Bangkok's famous sleaze district. In the village, Suko and his seven brothers and sisters had gutted fish for a few *baht* a day. Here he was paid thirty times as much to drink and dance with *farangs* who told him fascinating stories, to make his face prettier with makeup, to be fondled and flattered, to have his cock sucked as often as he could stand it. If he had to suck a few in return, how bad could that be? It was far from the worst thing he had ever put in his mouth. He rather liked the taste of sperm, if not the odd little tickle it left in the back of his throat.

He enjoyed the feel of male flesh against his own and the feel of strong arms enfolding him, loved never knowing what the night would bring. He marvelled at the range of body types among Americans and English, Germans and Australians. Some had skin as soft and pale as rice-flour dough; some were covered with thick hair like wool matting their chests and arms. They might be fat or emaciated, squat or ponderously tall, ugly, handsome, or forgettable. All the Thai boys he knew were lean, light brown, small-boned and smooth-skinned, with sweet androgynous faces. So was he. So was Noy.

From the cheap boom box in the corner of the room, Robert Smith sang that Suko made him feel young again. Suko scowled at the box. Noy had given him that tape, a poor-quality Bangkok bootleg of the Cure, right after Suko first spoke of leaving the country. Last year. The year Suko decided to get on with his life.

The rest of them, these other slim raven-haired heartbreakers, they thought they would be able to live like this forever. They were seventeen, fifteen, younger. They were in love with their own faces in the mirror, jet-colored eyes glittering with drink and praise, lips bruised from too many rough kisses, too much expert use. They could not see themselves at thirty, could not imagine the roughening of their skin or the lines that bar life would etch into their faces. Some would end up hustling over on Soi Cowboy, Patpong's shabby cousin where the beer was cheaper and the tinsel tarnished, where the neon flickered fitfully or not at all. Some would move to the streets.

And some would simply disappear. Suko intended to be one of those.

Noy was just his age, and smart. Suko met him onstage at the Hi-Way Bar. They were performing the biker act, in which two boys sat facing each other astride the saddle of a Harley-Davidson, wearing only leather biker caps, tongue-kissing with sloppy abandon and masturbating each other while a ring of sweaty *farang* faces gathered around them.

Immediately afterward, while the come was still oozing between the thrumming saddle and the backs of their skinny thighs, Noy murmured into Suko's mouth "Wouldn't they be surprised if we just put this thing in gear and drove it into the crowd?"

Suko pulled back and stared at him. Noy's left arm was draped lazily around Suko's neck; Noy's right hand cupped Suko's cock, now tugging gently, now relaxing. Noy smiled and lifted one perfect eyebrow, and Suko found himself getting hard again for someone who wasn't even paying him.

Noy gave him a final squeeze and let go. "Don't make a date when you get done working," he told Suko. "Take me home with you."

Suko did, and even after a night on Patpong, they puzzled out one another's bodies like the streets of an unfamiliar city. Soon they were the undisputed stars of the Hi-Way's live sex shows; they knew how to love each other in private and how to make it look good in public. They made twice as much money as the other boys. Suko started saving up for a plane ticket.

But Noy spent his money on trinkets: T-shirts printed with obscene slogans, little bags of pot and pills, even a green glow-in-the-dark dildo to

use in their stage show. In the end, Noy was just smart enough to make his stupidity utterly infuriating.

I'm really leaving, Suko would tell him as they lay entwined on a straw pallet in the room they rented above a cheap restaurant, as the odors of *nam pla* and chili oil wafted through the open window to mingle with the scent of their lovemaking. *When I save up enough, I'm going to do it. You can come, but I won't wait for you once I have the money, not knowing how many ways I could lose this chance.*

But Noy never believed him, not until the night Suko showed him the one-way ticket. And how Noy cried then, real tears such as Suko had never thought to see from him, great childish tears that reddened his smooth skin and made his eyes swell to slits. He clutched at Suko's hands and slobbered on them and begged him not to go until Suko wanted to shove him face-first into the Patpong mud.

This is all you want? Suko demanded, waving a hand at the tawdry neon, the ramshackle bars, the Thai boys and girls putting everything on display with a clearly marked price tag: their flesh, their hunger, and if they stayed long enough, their souls. *This is enough for you? Well, it isn't enough for me.*

Noy had made his choices, had worked hard for them. But Suko had made his choices too, and no one could ever take them away. The city where he lived now, Los Angeles, was one of his choices. Another city of angels.

He had left Noy sobbing in the middle of Patpong 3, unable or unwilling to say goodbye. Now half a world lay between them, and with time, Suko's memories of Noy soured into anger. He had been nothing but a jaded, fiercely erotic, selfish boy, expecting Suko to give up the dreams of a lifetime for a few more years of mindless pleasure. *Asshole,* Suko thought, righteous anger flaring in his heart. *Jerk. Geek.*

Now Robert Smith wanted Suko to fly him to the moon. As reasonable a demand, really, as any Noy had handed him. Suko favored the boom box with his sweetest smile and carefully shaped his mouth round a phrase:

"Get a life, Robert!"

"I will always love you," Robert moaned.

Suko kept grinning at the box. But now an evil gleam came into his black eyes, and he spat out a single word.

"*NOT!*"

Justin hit the bars of West Hollywood hard and fast, pounding back martinis, which he couldn't help thinking of as martians ever since he'd read *The Shining*. Soon his brain felt pleasantly lubricated, half-numb.

He had managed to find five or six bars he liked within walking distance of each other, no mean feat in L.A. Just now he was leaning against the matte-gray wall of the Wounded Stag, an expensive club eerily lit with blue bulbs and blacklights. He let his eyes sweep over the crowd, then drift back to the sparkling drink in his hand. The gin shattered the light, turned it silver and razor-edged. The olive bobbed like a tiny severed head in a bath of caustic chemicals.

Something weird was happening on TV. Justin had walked out of Club 312, a cozy bar with Sinatra on the jukebox that was normally his favorite place to relax with a drink before starting the search for company. Tonight 312 was empty save for a small crowd of regulars clustered around the flickering set in the corner. He couldn't tell what was going on, since none of the regulars ever talked to him, or he to them.

But from the scraps of conversation—*eaten alive, night of the living dead*—and edgy laughter he caught, Justin assumed some channel was showing a Halloween horror retrospective. The holiday fell next week and he'd been meaning to get some candy. You ought to have something to offer trick-or-treaters if you were going to invite them in.

He heard a newscaster's voice saying "This has been a special report. We'll keep you informed throughout the evening as more information becomes available…" Could that be part of a horror filmfest? A fake, maybe, like that radio broadcast in the thirties that had driven people to slit their wrists. They'd been afraid of Martians, Justin remembered. He downed the last of his own martian and left the bar. He didn't care about the news. He would be making his own living dead tonight.

The Wounded Stag had no TV. Pictures were passé here, best left to that stillborn golden calf that was the *other* Hollywood. Sound was the thing, pounds and pounds of it pushing against the eardrums, saturating the brain, making the very skin feel tender and bruised if you withstood it long enough. Beyond headache lay transcendence.

The music at the Stag was mostly psycho-industrial, Skinny Puppy and Einstürzende Neubauten and Ministry, the Butthole Surfers and Nine Inch

Nails and My Bloody Valentine. Justin liked the names of the bands better than he liked the music. The only time they played Sinatra here was at closing hour, when they wanted to drive people out.

But the Stag was where the truly beautiful boys came, the drop-dead boys who could get away with shaving half their hair and dyeing the other half dead black or lurid violet, or wearing it long and stringy and filthy, or piercing their faces twenty times. They swept through the door wrapped in their leather, their skimpy fishnet, their jangling rings and chains as if they wore precious jewels and ermine. They allowed themselves one contemptuous glance around the bar, then looked at no one. If you wanted their attention, you had to make a bid for it: an overpriced drink, a compliment that was just ambiguous enough to be cool. Never, ever a smile.

Like as not, you would be rejected summarily and without delay. But if even a spark of interest flared in those coldly beautiful black-rimmed eyes, what sordid fantasy! What exotic passion! What delicious viscera!

He had taken four boys home from the Stag on separate nights. They were still in his apartment, their organs wrapped neatly in plastic film inside his freezer, their hands tucked within easy reach under his mattress, their skulls nestled in a box in the closet. Justin smiled at them all he wanted to now, and they grinned right back at him. They had to. He had boiled them down to the bone, and all skulls grinned because they were so happy to be free of imprisoning flesh.

But skulls and mummified hands and salty slices of meat weren’t enough anymore. He wanted to keep the face, the thrilling pulse in the chest and guts, the sweet slick inside of the mouth and anus. He wanted to wrap his mouth around a cock that would grow hard without his having to shove a finger up inside it like some desiccated puppet. He wanted to keep a boy, not a motley collection of bits. And he wanted that boy to smile at him, *for* him, for *only* him.

Justin dragged his gaze away from the swirling depths of his martian and glanced at the door. The most beautiful boy he had ever seen was just coming in. And he was smiling: a big, sunny, unaffected and utterly guileless smile.

#

Suko leaned his head against the tall blond man's shoulder and stared out the window of the taxi. The candy panorama of West Hollywood spread out before them, neon smeared across hot asphalt, marabou cowboys and rhinestone drag queens posing in the headlights. The cab edged forward, parting the throng like a river, carrying Suko to whatever strange shores of pleasure still lay ahead of him this night.

"Where did you say you were from?" the man asked. As Suko answered, gentle fingers did something exciting to the inside of his thigh through his ripped black jeans. The blond man's voice was without accent, almost without inflection.

Of course, no one in L.A. had an accent. Everyone was from somewhere else, but they all strove to hide it, as if they'd slid from the womb craving flavored mineral water and sushi on Melrose. But Suko had met no one else who spoke like this man. His voice was soft and low, nearly a monotone. To Suko it was soothing; any kind of quiet aimed at him was soothing after the circuses of Patpong and West Hollywood, half a world apart but cut from the same bright cacophonous cloth. Cities of angels: *yeah, right*. Fallen angels.

They pulled up in front of a shabby apartment building that looked as if it had been modeled after a cardboard box sometime in the 1950s. The man—*Justin,* Suko remembered, his name was *Justin*—paid the cabdriver but didn't tip. The cab gunned away from the curb, tires squealing rudely on the cracked asphalt. Justin stumbled backward and bumped into Suko. "Sorry."

"Hey, no problem." That was still a mouthful—his tongue just naturally wanted to rattle off a *mai pen rai*—but Suko got all the syllables out. Justin smiled, the first time he'd done so since introducing himself. His long skinny fingers closed around Suko's wrist.

"Come on," he said. "It's safer if we go in the back way."

They walked around the corner of the building, under an iron stairwell and past some garbage cans that fairly shimmered with the odor of decay. Suko's foot hit something soft. He looked down, stopped, and backed into Justin. A young black man lay among the stinking cans, his head propped at a painful angle against the wall, his legs sprawled wide.

“Is he dead?” Suko clutched for his Buddha amulet. The man’s ghost might still be trapped in this mean alley, looking for living humans to plague. If it wanted to, it could suck out their life essences through their spinal columns like a child sipping soda from a straw.

But Justin shook his head. “Just drunk. See, there’s an empty bottle by his leg.”

“He looks dead.”

Justin prodded the black man’s thigh with the toe of his loafer. After a moment, the man stirred. His eyes never opened, but his hands twitched and his mouth gaped wide, chewing at the air.

“See?” Justin tugged at Suko’s arm. “Come on.”

They climbed the metal stairs and entered the building through a fire door wedged open with a flattened Old Milwaukee can. Justin led the way down a hall colored only by shadow and grime, stopped in front of a door identical to all the others but for the number *21* stamped on a metal plate small as an egg, and undid a complicated series of locks. He opened the door a crack and ushered Suko inside, then followed and turned to do up all the locks again.

At once Suko noticed the smell. First there was only the most delicate tendril, like a pale brown finger tickling the back of his throat; then a wave hit him, powerful and nauseating. It was the smell of the garbage cans downstairs, increased a hundredfold and overlaid with other smells: cooking oil, air freshener, some caustic chemical odor that stung his nostrils. It was the smell of rot. And it filled the apartment.

Justin saw Suko wrinkling his nose. “My refrigerator broke,” he said. “Damn landlord says he can’t replace it till next week. I just bought a bunch of meat on sale and it all went bad. Don’t look in the fridge, whatever you do.”

“Why you don’t—” Suko caught himself. “Why *don’t you* throw it out?”

“Oh…” Justin looked vaguely surprised for a moment. The he shrugged. “I’ll get around to it, I guess. It doesn’t bother me much.”

He pulled a bottle of rum from somewhere, poured a few inches into a glass already sitting on the countertop and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. Justin had been impressed by Suko’s taste for straight sugared rum back at the Stag, and said he had some expensive Bacardi he wanted Suko to try. Their fingertips kissed as the glass changed hands, and a tiny thrill ran

down Suko's spine. Justin was a little weird, but Suko could handle that, no problem. And there was a definite sexual charge between them. Suko felt sure the rest of the night would swarm with flavors and sensations, fireworks and roses.

Justin watched Suko sip the rum. His eyes were an odd, deep lilac-blue, a color Suko had never seen before in the endless spectrum of American eyes. The liquor tasted faintly bitter beneath the sugar, as if the glass weren't quite clean. Again, Suko could deal; a clean glass at the Hi-Way Bar on Patpong 3 was a rare find.

"Do you want to smoke some weed?" Justin asked when Suko had polished off an inch of the Bacardi.

"Sure."

"It's in the bedroom." Suko was ready to follow him there, but Justin said, "I'll get it," and hurried out of the kitchen. Suko heard him banging about in the other room, opening and shutting a great many drawers.

Suko drank more rum. He glanced sideways at the refrigerator, a modern monolith of shining harvest gold, without the cozy clutter he had seen decorating the fridges of others: memo boards, shopping lists, food-shaped magnets trapping snapshots or newspaper cartoons. It gave off a nearly imperceptible hum, the sound of a motor running smoothly. And the smell of decay seemed to emanate from all around the apartment, not just the fridge. Could it really be broken?

He grabbed the door handle and tugged. The seal sucked softly back for a second; then the door swung wide and the refrigerator light clicked on.

A fresh wave of rot washed over him. Maybe Justin hadn't been lying about meat gone bad. The contents of the fridge were meager and depressing: a decimated twelve-pack of cheap beer, a crusted jar of Gulden's Spicy Brown mustard, several lumpy packages wrapped in foil. A residue of rusty red on the bottom shelf, like the juice that might leak out of a meat tray. And pushed far to the back, a large Tupperware cake server, incongruous among the slim bachelor pickings.

Suko touched one of the beer cans. It was icy cold.

Something inside the cake server was moving. He could just make out its faint shadowy convulsions through the opaque plastic.

Suko slammed the door and stumbled away. Justin was just coming back in. He gripped Suko's arms, stared into his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing—I—"

“Did you open the fridge?”

“No!”

Justin shook him. The strange lilac eyes had gone muddy, the handsome features twisted into a mean mask. “*Did you open the fucking fridge?*” Suko felt droplets of spit land on his face, his lips. He wished miserably that they could have gotten there some other way, any way but this. He had wanted to make love with this man.

“DID YOU—”

“NO!!!”

Suko thought he might cry. At the same time he had begun to feel remote, far away from the ugly scene, as if he were floating in a corner watching it but not caring much what happened. It must be the rum. But it wasn’t like being drunk; that was a familiar feeling. This was more like the time Noy had convinced him to take two Valiums. An hour after swallowing the little yellow wafers, Suko had watched Noy suck him off from a million miles away, wondering why anyone ever got excited about this, why anyone ever got excited about anything.

He had hated the feeling then. He hated it more now, because it was pulling him down.

He was afraid it might be the last thing he ever felt.

He was afraid it might not be.

Justin half-dragged, half-carried Suko into the bedroom and dumped him on the mattress. He felt the boy’s delicate ivory bones shifting under his hands, the boy’s exquisite mass of organs pressing against his groin. He wanted to unzip that sweet sack of skin right now, sink his teeth into that beating, bleeding heart…but no. He had other plans for this one.

He’d closed the door to the adjacent bathroom in case he brought the boy in here still conscious. Most of a body was soaking in a tub full of icewater and Clorox. Suko wouldn’t have needed to see that. Justin almost opened the door for the extra light, but decided not to. He didn’t want to leave the bedside even for a second.

His supplies were ready on the nightstand. Justin plugged the drill’s power cord into the socket behind the bed, gently thumbed up one of Suko’s makeup-smudged eyelids and examined the silvery sclera. The sleeping pills had worked fine, as always. He ground them up and put them in a glass

before he left. That way, when he brought home company, Justin could simply pour him a drink in the special glass.

He used the scissors to slice off Suko's shirt, which was so artfully ripped up that Justin hardly had to damage it further to remove it. He cut away the beads and amulets, saving the tiny wooden penis, which had caught his eye back at the Stag. His own penis ached and burned. He pressed his ear against the narrow chest, heard the lungs pull in a deep slow breath, then release it just as easily. He heard blood moving unhurried through arteries and veins, heard a secret stomach sound from down below. Justin could listen to a boy's chest and stomach all night, but reluctantly he took his ear away.

He crawled onto the bed, positioned Suko's head in his lap, and hefted the drill, which was heavier than he remembered. He hoped he would be able to control how far the bit went in. A fraction of an inch too deep into the brain could ruin everything. It was only the frontal lobes he wanted to penetrate, the cradle of free will.

Justin parted the boy's thick black hair and placed the diamond-tipped bit against the center of the pale, faintly shiny scalp. He took a deep breath, bit his lip, and squeezed the trigger. When he took the drill away, there was a tiny, perfect black hole near the crown of the boy's head.

He picked up the syringe, slid the needle in and forward, toward the forehead. He felt a tiny resistance, as if the needle was passing through a hair-thin elastic membrane. He pushed the plunger and flooded the boy's brain with chlorine bleach.

Three things happened at once.

Suko's eyes fluttered open.

Justin had an explosive orgasm in his pants.

Something heavy thudded against the bathroom door.

Suko saw the blond man's face upside down, the lilac eyes like little slices of moon, the mouth a reverse smile or grimace. A whining buzz filled his skull, seemed to jar the very plates of his skull, as if hornets had built a nest inside his brain. A dull ache spread spiderlike over the top of his head.

He smelled roses, though he had seen none in the room. He smelled wood shavings, the sharp stink of shit, the perfume of ripe oranges. Each of these scents was gone as quickly as it had come. Lingering was a burnt

metallic flavor, a little like the taste that had lingered in his mouth the time he'd had a tooth filled in Bangkok.

Shavings. Roses. Cut grass. Sour milk. And underneath it all, the smell of rotting flesh.

Suko's field of vision went solid screaming chartreuse, then danger red. Now Justin was back, a negative of himself, hair green, face inky purple, eyes white circles with pinholes at their centers like tiny imploding suns. And suddenly something else was in the frame as well. Something all black, with holes where no holes should be. A face swollen and torn, a face that could not be alive, but whose jaw was moving.

A hand missing most of its fingers closed on the back of Justin's hair and yanked. A drooling purple mouth closed on Justin's throat and tore away a chunk.

Suko managed to sit up. His vision spun and yawed. The reek of rot was dizzying, and overlying it was a new stinging smell, a chemical smell he could not identify. Something salty ran into his eyes. He touched his face, and his fingers came away slicked with a thin clear substance.

The thing wrapped skeletal arms around Justin and pulled him off the bed. They rolled on the floor together, Justin's blood fountaining out of his throat, the thing grunting and lapping at it. Ragged flesh trailed from its mouth.

Justin wasn't screaming, Suko realized.

He was *smiling.*

It was the boy from the bathtub. Justin couldn't see his face, but he could smell the Clorox, raw and fresh. He had carved a great deal of flesh off of this one, as well as removing the viscera. But he had not yet cut off the head. Now it was snuggled under his chin, tongue burrowing like a worm into his wounded throat. He felt the teeth tearing at him, chunks of his skin and muscle disappearing down the boy's gullet. He felt one of the bones in his neck crack and splinter.

The pain was as shocking as an orgasm, but cleaner. The joy was like nothing he had known before, not when he watched his mother die, not when he tasted the flesh of another person for the first time. It had worked. Not only was the Asian boy still alive, but the others had come back as well. They had never left Justin at all. They had only been waiting.

He got his arms around the hollow body, pulled it closer. He cupped the cold rubbery buttocks, entwined his legs with the thrusting bones of its thighs. When its jaws released his throat, he pressed his face against the voracious swollen one, pushed his tongue between the blackened lips and felt the teeth rip it out. His mouth filled with blood and rot. He swallowed, gagged, swallowed again.

A head rolled out from under the bed, pushing itself by frantic motions of jaw and tongue. The severed ends of the neck muscles twitched, trying to help it along. Its nose and left eyebrow were pierced with silver rings, its empty eye sockets crusted with blood and greasy black makeup. It reached Justin and bit deep into one of his thighs. He kicked once, in surprise, then bent his leg so that the teeth could more easily get at the soft muscle of his groin. He felt his flesh peeling away.

The upper half of a body was pulling itself out of the closet. Its black-lacquered nails dug into the carpet. Ropes of intestine trailed behind it, coming apart, leaving a trail of shit and ichor on the rug. This one had been, possibly, a Mexican boy. Now its skin was the color of decaying eggplant, and very few teeth were left in its gaping mouth. Dimly Justin remembered extracting them with a pair of pliers after the rigor mortis had slackened.

It tore Justin's belly open with its hands and sank its face into his guts. He arched his back, felt its fingers plunging deep, its mouth lapping at the very core of him.

The small pleasures of his life—reading, listening to the music of another time, choking the life out of boys and playing with their abandoned shells—were nothing compared to this. He wanted it to go on forever.

But, eventually, he died.

The corpse from the bathtub chewed at Justin's throat and chest. Half-chewed pieces of Justin slid down its gullet, into the great scooped-out hollow of its abdomen, out onto the floor.

The corpse from the closet sucked up the liquor and partly digested meat it found in Justin's stomach.

The head bit into Justin's scrotum and gulped the savory mass of the testicles like a pair of tender oysters.

They seemed to know when to stop feeding, to refrain from pulling him completely apart, to leave enough of him. When he came back, Justin knew exactly what to do.

After all, he had been doing it long before most of the others.

Suko stumbled out of the bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Something was rolling around and around in the refrigerator, banging against the inside of the door. He almost went over to open it, only caught himself at the last second. He wasn't thinking very clearly. His head felt wrong somehow, his brain caught in a downward spiral. He did not understand what he had just seen. But he knew he had to get out of the apartment.

No problem, a voice yammered in his head. *Stay Cool. Chill out. Don't have a cow, man*. He barely knew the meaning of the words. The American voice seemed to be receding down a long black tunnel; already it was so tiny and faint he could hardly hear it. He realized he was thinking in Thai for the first time in years. Even his native language was strange, a flurry of quick sharp syllables like little whirling razorblades slicing into the meat of his brain.

He fumbled with the complicated series of locks, yanked the door open and nearly fell into the hall. How had he entered the building?...Up a metal staircase, through a door at the end of the long dark hall. He reached it and let himself out. The hot October night seared his lungs. He could smell every poisonous particle of exhaust blanketing the city, every atom of shit and filth and blood baked onto the streets. Not like the ripe wet kiss of Bangkok, but so arid, so mercilessly dry. He felt his way down the fire escape and around the corner of the building.

The empty street seemed a mile wide. There was no sidewalk, only a steep curb and a long gray boulevard stretching away toward some other part of the city. There were no cars; he could hear no traffic anywhere. Even with his head feeling so strange, Suko knew something was wrong. L.A. streets were often empty of people, but always there were cars.

Far away at the next intersection, he made out a small group of figures straggling in his direction, bathed in a traffic light's red glow. For a long moment he watched them come, trying to be sure they were really there, wondering what he should do. Then he started toward them. The blond man had done something awful to his head; he needed help. Maybe the figures would be able to help him.

But when he got closer, he saw that they were like the things he had seen in the bedroom. One had a long fatty slash wound across its bare torso.

One had been gouged in the face with something jagged; its nose was cloven in half and an eyeball hung out of the socket, leaking yolky fluid. One had no wounds, but looked as if it had starved to death; its nude body was all bone-ends and wasted hollows, its genitals shrivelled into the pelvic cavity, its blue-white skin covered with huge black and purple lesions.

When they saw him, the things opened their mouths and widened their nostrils, catching his scent. It was too late to get away. He couldn't run, didn't think he would even be able to stand up much longer. He stumbled forward and gave himself to them.

The little group closed around Suko, keeping him on his feet, supporting him as best they could. Gouged Eyeball caught him and steadied him. Slash Wound mouthed his shoulder as if in comfort, but did not bite. Lesions nudged him, urged him on. Suko realized they were *herding* him. They recognized him as one of their own, separated from the flock somehow. They were welcoming him back in.

Miserably, Suko wondered what would happen when they met someone alive.

Then the hunger flared in his belly, and he knew.

THE HEART OF NEW ORLEANS

A bar where I sometimes drink has New Orleans street scenes painted on the walls. Not cliché tourist shit like Carnival parades and jazz funerals, but regular people's views of the city: a dilapidated old shotgun house, a snowball stand, the kind of Mid-City corner grocery out of which I'd expect to see the grocer being rolled on a gurney, shot dead in a robbery that netted $26. I guess most people wouldn't imagine the dead grocer, but I see him or some equally sad variation several times a month.

I don't go to this bar too often, because I'll just be wanting to relax and drink my bourbon, and I'll catch myself making up stories about the people in the murals. That wouldn't be so bad except that the stories inevitably end in their deaths. I've always been able to look death straight in the eye, but I prefer not to do so during my off-hours. To be kicking back with a shot of Wild Turkey, to gaze at a painting of a nice old man playing dominoes and suddenly find myself imagining him in cardiac arrest—it makes me feel like I am riding on a bum trip, as people used to say and probably still do somewhere.

I have always prided myself on fulfilling my position as coroner of New Orleans with no trace of morbidity. I may never live up to my predecessor, who played a mean jazz trumpet, but I am a bit of a bon vivant in my own quiet way. I enjoy the bourbon, though seldom to excess. Fine restaurants are an important part of my life. I try to keep up with the local literary scene, once even speaking in a very general way about some of my odder cases to a group of mystery writers at the Tennessee Williams Festival. In short, I like to think that I'm not particularly death-obsessed as coroners go, nor cursed with an overactive imagination.

So I keep telling myself that the case of the Stubbs boy was just an anomaly, one of the many inexplicable but ultimately mundane things that any medical worker will encounter in the course of a long career. I tell myself that even as I slide another fragment of his heart under the

microscope, and I try to stay away from the bar with the street scenes on the walls, and occasionally I have an extra drink before turning in at night.

Children's deaths are terribly hard on everyone who must deal with them, even a childless and relatively heartless bastard like me. A little boy on the slab looks less natural, somehow, than the body of an adult. You know they never contemplated their mortality, never pondered when and how it would come, never went through all the maundering about life and death and the cosmos that adults think separates them from their simian brothers. Perhaps that should make the sight more bearable, but instead it only accentuates their terrible vulnerability: they never even knew it was coming, yet here they lie.

As dead children go, five-year-old Matthew Stubbs was less heartrending than many I have seen. He was not beaten to death by a parent or stepparent; he was not left to freeze in an unheated apartment while his guardians smoked crack next door; he was not shot in his mother's arms. He was simply the victim of a stupid accident far too common in south Louisiana: left alone for a few minutes while his mother checked on dinner, he let himself into a neighbor's yard, fell face-first into a wading pool, and drowned in a few inches of tepid water. That was what the officers on the scene had surmised, anyway. My job was to disprove or confirm this dreary little scenario.

Matthew was a handsome little boy with dark curly hair and long eyelashes that lay damply against his livid cheeks. Aside from some whitish purge in his mouth and nostrils—a mixture of water and mucus whipped into a froth by his struggling lungs—I found no external signs of trauma on him, nothing to suggest he had been dumped in the pool rather than falling. His blood had the bright cherry-red color characteristic of oxygen deprivation. His lungs were full of more white froth, and his stomach contained only water and a few fragments of the cold spaghetti he'd reportedly had for lunch that day. This was a straightforward drowning; I saw scores of them every summer. People fell out of boats or went swimming in the Mississippi and often didn't surface until days later. For the sake of his parents, I was glad this boy hadn't been in the water long enough to show any disfigurement.

Nothing seemed strange about the case until I examined the heart. I excised it from its moorings and cupped it in my gloved hand, preparing to weigh it, when something caught my eye. I held the little organ up to the

light and tilted it this way and that, trying to understand what I saw. Internal organs are as distinctive as hands or facial features, with infinite subtleties of color, shape, venation. But I'd never seen a pattern like the one that covered the entire surface of this child's heart. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny lines were somehow etched upon the muscle, spiraling from the aorta and vena cava all the way down to the tips of the ventricles. When I dissected the heart and washed out the blood that had clotted there, I saw similar marks covering its inner chambers. Bringing a piece of the tissue close to my eyes, I thought I could make out loops and spikes, as if the lines were made up of words far too small to read.

Of course that couldn't be; it was simply a strange pattern of striation in the muscle fibers. The fact that I'd never seen anything like it was of no consequence—I'd never seen a teratoma, either, until the day I found a mass of undifferentiated tissue with two baby teeth embedded in a man's left kidney. The man had lived with this inside him for fifty-seven years, dying of a wholly unrelated aneurysm. There had been no need to inform his family of the absorbed twin's existence, which was why it now floated in a jar on my desk instead of being cremated with him.

At least I had heard of teratomas, though, had read about them and seen pictures. I'd never heard of anyone whose heart looked as if someone had taken an engraving tool to it. This condition had nothing to do with Matthew Stubbs' death, though, so it concerned me only as a curiosity. I noted it into the small microphone clipped to my lapel, then preserved the organ in a container of formalin. Though it didn't relate to the cause of death, it was certainly notable enough to save. Perhaps I'd show it to my former assistant, Jeffrey, who always appreciated an anomaly. He was in medical school at Tulane now, but he had always been among the most trusted of my staff and sometimes dropped by the morgue to see how I was doing. I got the feeling he worried about me since my separation from my husband. Seymour had never formally announced that he was leaving me—he'd just gone up to New York to visit his family and kept extending the "vacation." He'd been up there for seven months now. *Typical passive-aggressive poet*, I thought when I let it enter my mind at all.

I had six other posts that day, seven the next. In the flow of gunshot wounds, car accident injuries, and heart attacks, nothing happened to remind me of one drowned little boy. I didn't think of Matthew Stubbs again until his parents showed up two days later to invite me to his funeral.

This isn’t as rare as you might think. Some families would like to pretend that I and my office don’t exist; never mind thinking about what we do here. But some perceive that their loved ones have shared a final, intimate relationship with me, and they want me along for one more step. I almost always find a way of gracefully declining. I would have done so in this case if Leonetta Stubbs hadn’t bulldozed right over me.

For one thing, they usually call rather than dropping by. When I heard that Mr. and Mrs. Stubbs were at the morgue’s front desk, I expected a lawsuit at worst, an hysterical outburst at best. I made sure there was no blood on my lab coat before going up front to see what they wanted, but I couldn’t protect them from the bleak appearance or antiseptically rotten smell of the place. I never ask decedents’ family members to come here if I can avoid it. To me it is part work, part home, but to many it is the material of nightmares.

Henry Stubbs was a tall honest-faced man with a dazed look in his dark eyes. Despite the Irish surname, his olive complexion and thick shock of black hair made me suspect a Sicilian mother or grandmother. Though he shook my hand and spoke politely to me, I could tell he had turned most of his grief inward, and that his wife was the driving force here. Even in mourning, Leonetta Stubbs was something of a vision. Though she couldn’t have been much older than thirty-five, her black shirtwaist dress, little pillbox hat, and deep red lipstick were like things an old lady would wear. The self-conscious hipsters who have begun to take over the Bywater and Lower Ninth Ward in recent years sometimes dress similarly, but unlike them, Leonetta didn’t remind me of a child playing dress-up; something about the ensemble told me she knew of no other way to present herself. I imagined a closet full of severe dresses and outdated hats, possibly even inherited from her mother.

“Dr. Brite,” she said, and clasped my hand in both of her own. Until I actually looked down and saw them with my own eyes, I couldn’t quite fathom that she was wearing gloves—white cotton ones that in no way went with the rest of her outfit. Outside of the newspaper’s Carnival pages, I wasn’t sure I had ever seen a woman wearing gloves before.

“I have been waiting on tenterhooks to speak to you,” she told me.

Though the family lived in a lower-middle-class neighborhood off Elysian Fields, her voice was rich with Uptown accents. Something running

along the surface of it made me know she hadn’t been raised Uptown, but had worked hard to cultivate that voice.

“Thank you for taking the time to talk us,” said her husband. He had a regular gritty, yatty New Orleans accent, and those were just about the only words he said to me.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m so sorry about your son. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Might we chat in your office?” Leonetta asked.

I pictured my desk covered with autopsy reports, bulletin boards full of glossy crime-scene photos, shelves crammed with models of internal organs and things in jars. “There’s really no room to sit down in my office. If you’ll take a chair over here, perhaps I can help you.”

We settled in the hard plastic chairs common to all official waiting rooms, as if such places must provide as little comfort as possible. I gazed at Leonetta, concerned about the purpose of her visit but also frankly curious by now.

“You must think me such a dreadful mother,” she said.

It wasn’t what I expected, but I’d heard it before. “Not at all. It’s true that people don’t realize how fast a child can get into trouble, but some accidents are unavoidable.”

“Bosh,” she said. “Bosh, bother, and bullshit.” The expletive startled me coming out of her mouth, but no more so than the previous two words had done. Just as I’d never met anyone wearing white gloves, I had never heard anyone say “bosh” before. “Of course I should have been watching him more closely. He was my only child, you know. I only left him in the yard because I was trying to cook that wretched red gravy, and I’m not used to it. You see, I don’t cook. Henry’s mother thinks I should cook more. In fact, she gave me the recipe.”

I couldn’t help glancing at Henry, who only looked more miserable.

“I didn’t know if it would boil over, or burn, or what it might do. I was only trying to prove that I could do something the rest of the family takes for granted. They’re all wonderful cooks, to hear his mother tell it. Not me, though, not silly Leonetta with her airs and pretensions. I couldn’t even make spaghetti sauce without letting the baby drown, could I, Henry?”

Henry Stubbs rose from the uncomfortable chair. “I’ll wait in the car,” he said, and disappeared through the exit door with one anguished glance back at me and his wife.

“They’re not people of quality,” she said with the air of one imparting a dirty secret. “I thought Henry would amount to something when I married him. He talked about going to law school, but that was only meant to impress me. Now he works in that damn candy factory with his father, and he’ll never do anything more than that.”

“Mrs. Stubbs, I hardly think—”

She went on as if I had not spoken. “My son was an exceptional child. I’m sure you could tell, even…in his condition. Doubtless there are biological differences between normal people and geniuses.”

Of course I thought then of the strange patterns I had observed in the tissue of the little boy’s heart, but I said nothing, wanting to neither feed nor destroy whatever delusions sustained her.

“His playschool teacher said he was gifted. His IQ couldn’t even be measured with the regular tests.”

“Mrs. Stubbs…”

“Oh, I know what you’re going to say. Or would say if you weren’t too polite. He was only five. It was too early to tell about these things. That’s exactly what his father said. ‘What you talking about, Leonetta? He’s just a baby. He ain’t no Einstein.’ ”

I was struck by the bitterness that came into her voice when she mentioned her husband, and also by her skill at mimicking his homely accent.

“He *was* a genius, though. Not an Einstein—his talents didn’t lie in the direction of math, science, all that nonsense.” With a flip of her gloved hand she dismissed entire fields of scholarly pursuit. “My son would have written great books someday. I know, because he told me so.”

“He told you…?”

“Of course he could already read. He couldn’t write yet, not really, but he could give dictation. He’d tell little stories and I would write them down. One day we stapled them all together in a kind of book, and he said to me, ‘Momma, I’m going to write a real book someday.’

“ ‘You are?’ I asked him. ‘What are you going to write about?’

“ ‘About the true heart of New Orleans,’ he told me.”

My face must have expressed the skepticism I felt, for Leonetta said to me, “I know how it sounds, Doctor. Not like something a five-year-old would say. He did, though. My son was truly exceptional.”

She turned wide cornflower-blue eyes upon me. While I sympathized with her loss, I had thought her a rude and arrogant woman. She'd come here looking for absolution, or at least trying to justify the carelessness that had killed her son. She had humiliated her grieving husband in front of me. Looking into her eyes, though, I saw the vulnerability she didn't mean to reveal, and I found myself identifying with it to a dangerous degree. In those eyes I thought I saw the universal futility of life, the futility we are forever trying to deny because accepting it would obviate our reasons for continuing to live. You risk your soul trying to snatch a man from death's grasp, and two years later he dies of cancer at age forty. You let a husband see parts of yourself no one else knows, and he turns his back and leaves you. You put all your love and hope into a beautiful little boy who drowns in a few inches of water. I saw terrible things in Leonetta Stubbs' eyes, but I could not look away.

"Doctor," she said, "that book will never be written. But I thank you for taking care of Matthew. Would you do one more thing for him? Would you come to his funeral?"

In that moment there was very little I could have refused her. She gave me the name of the funeral home and the time of the Mass the next day, and as I ushered her out the door, I wondered what force of nature had just rolled over me.

When I finished work late that evening, I couldn't bear the thought of my empty house. I went to the bar with the street scenes on the walls, drank two shots of bourbon, contemplated a third but knew how the media would salivate if I were pulled over for drunk driving. The crowd in the bar seemed younger than usual, and their vigor depressed me. I drove home, drank another bourbon at my kitchen table, went to bed. I thought I'd never sleep. Then, abruptly, I found myself back in the bar. An unknown but familiar-looking young man had joined me at my table. His dark hair was clipped short, his features unremarkably handsome. It was his eyes that arrested me: they were as intense as Leonetta's, but nearly black.

"It's pretty embarrassing," he said. "I mean, what a stupid way to go, in a damn wading pool. Being five years old is no excuse for stupidity."

"What happened? Why did you fall in?"

"It was just one of those things. Just one of those crazy flings. I just wanted to go wading, but somehow I tripped getting in. I remember thinking, *Oh, no big deal, I'll get up in a second, it'll be easy.* And then I

tried, and…I just didn't have my body anymore. Do you know what I mean? It just wasn't *there.*"

"Probably you inhaled reflexively and lost consciousness. The shock can paralyze the vagus nerve—"

"No offense, Doctor, but I don't really care about the vagus nerve, or the Las Vegas nerve, or whatever you want to call it. None of it makes any difference to me."

"Is this the future? Am I seeing the life you would have lived?"

He smiled thinly. "Future? It doesn't mean anything to me. I'm five, I'm twenty-six, I'm eighty-two. I know it all." I thought I saw a look of fear cross his face, but it was gone in an instant. "There's no distinction for me, no concept of time. Nothing but an infinity of killed possibilities."

"Did you ever write that book?"

"What book?"

"Your mother said you intended to write a book. A book about the true heart of New Orleans."

"My mother says a lot of things. But the heart of New Orleans? You can see it in the face of that lady right there." He gestured toward one of the murals, at the painted figure of a white woman standing on the porch of a tiny Victorian shotgun house. Her hands were planted on her hips; a garishly patterned wrap concealed most of her ample figure. "Can you hear her? She's hollering for her kids to come in the house before it starts raining. She's saying, 'Darla! Tom-MY! Get in here before I come knock you upside da head with one a'dem bricks!' Hear her?"

His normal speaking voice wasn't as self-consciously cultured as Leonetta's, but it was a long way from downtown. When he imitated the woman calling her children, though, he seemed to *become* her for a moment, or nearly so. I could hear twenty years of cigarettes in her voice, could feel the weariness in her swollen ankles, could smell the chicory coffee, garlic, and mildew odors that permeated the little house. Apparently he hadn't just inherited his mother's talent for mimicry; he had surpassed it.

He would have surpassed it, I reminded myself, *if he had lived.* He had not lived. I had autopsied him myself, had touched his strange heart. Matthew Stubbs was laid out in a child-sized casket somewhere in the city, ready to be buried tomorrow, and this was only a dream.

Even so, it was better than the stories I had often found myself making up about the murals. He hadn't killed off the woman as I would have been

compelled to do. Rather, with a few deft strokes, he had made me imagine her whole life. I began to wonder if his mother was right. Perhaps he was an exceptional child; perhaps he would grow up to write a great book about New Orleans.

Had been an exceptional child. *Would have written* a great book. Sitting here beside him, watching him sip a tall glass of beer, it was hard to remember that he would never do any of these things.

"You're right," I told him. "That is the heart of New Orleans. One of them, anyway."

"It's all written down," he said, touching the back of my hand. "Keep it safe for me, will you?"

Suddenly I was awake in a lonely bed, the cats curled near my feet more an annoyance than a comfort. A faint taste of bourbon lingered in my mouth…but of course it would; I'd had two shots at the bar and another before retiring. Pale dawn light had begun to fill the room. Seymour had always brought me coffee in bed fixed just the way I liked it, and I could never get it quite right. Every morning as I spooned the grounds into the filter, I thought I heard Sarah Vaughan singing, "Once you told me I'd awaken with the sun—and order orange juice for one…" Too true, Sarah, but at least you could sing like God's own cello. What could I do except cut into cold flesh to offer the living cold comfort?

Not wanting to make conversation with anyone, I intended to arrive just in time for the Mass, but the visitation was still going on when I entered the funeral home on Elysian Fields Avenue. Funerals of small children tend to be sparsely attended—the children themselves haven't had time to form a large social group, and the parents' friends, who usually have kids of their own, don't like confronting the ephemerality of these young lives. But the lobby and viewing room were packed with people. From the St. Joseph prayer card stacked on a side table, I assumed the Stubbses were Catholic, so perhaps they were an unusually large family.

I approached the casket. At least they hadn't dressed him in a suit—there are few sights more pathetically creepy than a dead child wearing a tiny suit and tie. Matthew wore children's clothes, a blue shirt and a pair of yellow overalls with Cookie Monster embroidered on the breast pocket. A white rosary twined around the fingers of one small hand. His face looked much worse than it had when I'd autopsied him, cheeks unnaturally pink from too much arterial fluid, lips sewn tightly shut, long eyelashes poking

from the swollen flesh like a shrunken head's. As I turned away, I thought a sarcastic voice spoke softly in my ear: "Why do the sweetest flowers wither and fall from the stem?" But no one was there.

The Mass was dreadful, tweedling organ music and platitudes about how God's will benefits us even when we cannot understand it. I wondered how Henry and Leonetta Stubbs were supposed to have benefited from their small son's death. The mourners were required to rise and sit back down seemingly hundreds of times, and since I wasn't raised Catholic, I was always a beat behind. Several rows ahead, a handsome young man seemed to be having as much trouble as I. He looked familiar, and eventually I recognized him as a young chef who had won a James Beard award a few years ago. I am ashamed to admit that I spent the remainder of the Mass entertaining myself with memories of his fresh sardines in Galliano-laced sweet and sour sauce.

I was on my way out when Leonetta Stubbs approached me. "Dr. Brite, thank you so much for coming."

"Not at all," I said awkwardly.

"I hoped you would. I wanted to give you this—for taking care of Matthew."

She pressed a piece of folded manila paper into my hand. I unfolded it and saw a child's crayon drawing. It was crude, but I could make out the figure of a woman in front of a house and some children nearby. Below it, in an adult's handwriting, were written the words: "Darla! Tommy! Get in here before I knock you upside the head!"

"He told me what to write," said Leonetta, "and I wrote it for him. I suppose you could call it a cartoon, couldn't you?"

"Yes, indeed," I said as gooseflesh rippled up my arms. "What does it mean?"

"Well, I told you that my husband doesn't make a great deal of money, and I'm afraid we live in a rather…*low-quality* neighborhood. One day the woman next door was screaming at her children to come in before it started to rain. For some reason this struck Matthew as hilarious—I suppose he liked the idea of her being so concerned for their welfare that she'd threaten them with a beating. For such a young child, he had a very well-developed sense of irony."

"I can see that." I folded the drawing and slipped it into my pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Stubbs. Take care of yourself."

As I climbed into my car, I began to talk out loud. “Yes, absolutely, a very well-developed sense of irony. Leaving your story in a place where no one can find it until you’re dead and autopsied. Or maybe you couldn’t help it; maybe you were just made that way. But you must have done many drawings. What caused your mother to give me that particular one? Did you make her do it? And what am I supposed to do with your damn story anyway? What did you mean, keep it safe for you? Am I supposed to transcribe it? Publish it? Burn it? What? Why do I have to be responsible for everything?”

If Seymour were here, I could have asked him whether I might be going mad, but he was gone. I had no sense of perspective anymore, nothing to measure myself against. I turned off Esplanade onto Broad Street and headed for the morgue, where a small boy’s heart lay dreaming in formalin. I wondered if I would be able to read it.

THE SIXTH SENTINEL

I first knew hard luck Rosalie Smith when she was a thin frayed rope of a child, twenty years old and already well acquainted with the solitude at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. Her hair was brittle from too many dye jobs, bright red last week, black as the grave today, purple and green for Mardi Gras. Her face was fine-boned and faintly feral, the eyes carefully lined in black, the rouged lips stretched tight over the sharp little teeth. If I had been able to touch Rosalie, her skin would have felt silky and faintly dry, her hair would have been like electricity brushing my face in the dark.

But I could not touch Rosalie, not so that she would notice. I could pass my fingers through the meat of her arm, pale as veal and packed like flaky fish flesh between her thin bones. I could wrap my hand around the smooth porcelain ball of her wrist. But as far as she was concerned, my touch went through her like so much dead air. All she could feel of me was a chill like ice crystallizing along her spine.

“Your liver has the texture of hot, wet velvet,” I would tell her, reaching through her ribs to caress the tortured organ.

She’d shrug. “Another year in this town and it’ll be pickled.”

Rosalie came to the city of New Orleans because it was as far south as her money would take her—or so she said. She was escaping from a lover she would shudderingly refer to only as Joe Coffeespoon. The memory of his touch made her feel cold, far colder than my ectoplasmic fingers ever could, and she longed for the wet kiss of tropical nights.

She moved into an apartment in one of the oldest buildings in the French Quarter, above a “shoppe” that sold potions and philters. At first I wondered whether she would be pleased to find a ghost already residing in her cramped quarters, but as I watched her decorate the walls with shrouds of black lace and photographs of androgynous sunken-cheeked musicians who looked more dead than alive, I began to realize I could show myself safely, without threat of eviction. It is always a nuisance when someone calls in the exorcist. The priest himself is no threat, but the demons that

invariably follow him are large as cats and annoying as mosquitoes. It is these, not the intonations and holy water, that drive innocent spirits away.

But Rosalie only gave me a cool appraising look, introduced herself, then asked me for my name and my tale. The name she recognized, having seen it everywhere from the pages of history books to the shingles hanging outside dubious “absinthe” houses in the French Quarter. The tale—well, there were enough tales to entertain her for a thousand nights or more. (I, the Scheherazade of Barataria Bay!) How long had I wanted to tell those tales? I had been without a friend or a lover for more years than I could recall. (The company of other local ghosts did not interest me—they seemed a morbid lot, many of them headless or drenched in gore, manifesting only occasionally to point skeletal fingers at loose fireplace flagstones and then vanish without a word. I had met no personalities of substance, and certainly none with a history as exotic as mine.)

So I was glad for the company of Rosalie. As more old buildings are demolished I must constantly shift about the city, trying to find places where I resided in life, places where a shred of my soul remains to anchor me. There are still overgrown bayou islands and remote Mississippi coves I visit often, but to give up the drunken carnival of New Orleans, to forsake human companionship (witting or otherwise) would be to fully accept my death. Nearly two hundred years, and I still cannot do that.

“Jean,” she would say to me as evening fell like a slowly drifting purple scarf over the French Quarter, as the golden flames of the streetlights flickered on, “do you like these panties with the silver bustier, Jean?” (She pronounced my name correctly, in the French manner, like John but with the soft J.) Five nights of the week Rosalie had a job stripping at a nightclub on Bourbon Street. She selected her undress from a vast armoire crammed full of the microscopic wisps of clothing she referred to as “costumes,” some of which were only slightly more substantial than my own flesh. When she first told me of the job she thought I would be shocked, but I laughed. “I saw worse things in my day,” I assured her, thinking of lovely, shameless octoroon girls I had known, of famous “private shows” involving poisonous serpents sent from Haiti and the oiled stone phalluses of alleged voodoo idols.

I went to see Rosalie dance two or three times. The strip club was in an old row building, the former site of a bordello I remembered well. In my day the place had been decorated entirely in scarlet silk and purple velvet;

the effect was of enormous fleshy lips closing in upon you as you entered, drawing you into their dark depths. I quit visiting Rosalie at work when she said it unnerved her to suddenly catch sight of me in the hundreds of mirrors that now lined the club, a hundred spangle-fleshed Rosalies and a hundred translucent Jeans and a thousand pathetic weasel-eyed men all reflected to a point of swarming infinity far within the walls. I could see how the mirrors might make Rosalie nervous, but I believe she did not like me looking at the other dancers either, though she was the prettiest of a big-hipped, insipid-faced lot.

By day Rosalie wore black: lace and fishnet, leather and silk, the gaudy mourning clothes of the deather-children. I had to ask her to explain them to me, these deathers. They were children seldom older than eighteen who painted their faces stark white, rimmed their eyes with kohl, smudged their mouths black or blood-red. They made love in cemeteries, then plundered the rotting tombs for crucifixes to wear as jewelry. The music they listened to was alternately lush as a wreath of funeral roses and dark as four a.m., composed in suicidal gloom by the androgynes that decorated Rosalie's walls. I might have been able to tell these children a few things about death. Try drifting through a hundred years without a proper body, I might have said, without feet to touch the ground, without a tongue to taste wine or kiss. Then perhaps you will celebrate your life while you have it. But Rosalie would not listen to me when I got on this topic, and she never introduced me to any of her deather friends.

If she had any. I had seen other such children roaming the French Quarter after dark, but never in Rosalie's company. Often as not she would sit in her room and drink whiskey on her nights off, tipping inches of liquid amber fire over crackling ice cubes and polishing it off again, again, again. She never had a lover that I knew of, aside from the dreaded Coffeespoon, who it seemed had been quite wealthy by Rosalie's standards. Her customers at the club offered her ludicrous sums if she would only grant them one night of pleasure more exotic than their toadlike minds could imagine. A few might really have been able to pay such fortunes, but Rosalie ignored their tumescent pleading. She seemed not so much opposed to the idea of sex for money as simply uninterested in sex at all.

When she told me of the propositions she received, I thought of the many things I had buried in the earth during my days upon it. Treasure: hard money and jewels, the riches of the robbery that was my bread and butter,

the spoils of the murder that was my wine. There were still caches that no one had found and no one ever would. Any one of them would have been worth ten times the amounts these men offered.

Many times I tried to tell Rosalie where these caches were, but unlike some of her kind, she thought buried things should stay buried. She claimed that the thought of the treasure hidden under mud, stone, or brick, with people walking near it and sometimes right over it each day, amused her more than the thought of digging it up and spending it.

I never believed her. She would not let me see her eyes when she said these things. Her voice trembled when she spoke of the deathers who pursued grave-robbing as a sport. (“They pried up a granite slab that weighted fifty pounds,” she told me once, incredulously. “How could they bear to lift it off, in the dark, not knowing what might come out at them?”) There was a skeleton in a glass-topped coffin downstairs, in the voodoo shoppe, and Rosalie hardly liked to enter the shoppe because of it—I had seen her glancing out of the corner of her eye, as if the sad little bones simultaneously intrigued and appalled her.

It was some obsessive fear of hers, I realized. Rosalie shied away from all talk of dead things, of things buried, of digging in the ground. When I told her my tales she made me skip over the parts where treasures or bodies were buried; she would not let me describe the fetor of the nighttime swamp, the faint flickering lights of Saint Elmo’s fire, the deep sucking sound the mud made when a shovel was thrust into it. She would allow me no descriptions of burials at sea or shallow bayou graves. She covered her ears when I told her of a rascal whose corpse I hung from the knotted black bough of a hundred-year-old oak. It was a remarkable thing, too—when I rode past the remote spot a year later, his perfect skeleton still hung there, woven together by strands of gray Spanish moss. It wound around his long bones and cascaded from the empty sockets of his eyes, it forced his jaws open and dangled from his chin like a long gray beard—but Rosalie did not want to hear about it.

When I confronted her with her own dread, she refused to own up to it. “Whoever said graveyards were romantic,” she demanded. “Whoever said I had to go digging up bones just because I lust after Venal St. Claire?” (Venal St. Claire was a musician, one of the stick-thin, mourning-shrouded

beauties that adorned the walls of Rosalie's room. I saw no evidence that she lusted after him or anyone else.) "I just wear black so that all my clothes will match," she told me solemnly, as if she expected me to believe it. "So I won't have to think about what to put on when I get up in the morning."

"But you *don't* get up in the morning."

"In the evening, then. *You* know what I mean." She tipped her head back and tongued the last drop of whiskey out of her glass. It was the most erotic thing I had ever seen her do. I ran my finger in among the smooth folds of her intestines. A momentary look of discomfort crossed her face, as if she had suffered a gas pain—attributable to the rotgut whiskey, no doubt. But she would not pursue the subject further.

So I watched her drink until she passed out, her brittle hair fanned across her pillow, the corner of her mouth drooling a tiny thread of spit onto her black silk coverlet. Then I went into her head. This was not a thing I liked to do often—on occasion I had noticed her looking askance at me the morning after, as if she remembered seeing me in her dreams and wondered how I had got there. If I could persuade Rosalie to dig up one cache of loot—just one—our troubles would end. She would never have to work again, and I could have her with me all the time. But first I had to find her fear. Until I knew what it was, and could figure out how to charm my way around it, my treasures were going to stay buried in black bayou mud.

So within moments I was sunk deep in the spongy tissue of Rosalie's brain, sifting through her childhood memories as if they were gold coins I had just lifted off a Spanish galleon. I thought I could smell the whiskey that clouded her dreams, a stinging mist.

I found it more quickly than I expected to. I had reminded Rosalie of her fear, and now—because she would not let her conscious mind remember—her unconscious mind was dreaming of it. For an instant I teetered on the edge of wakefulness; I was dimly aware of the room around me, the heavy furniture and flocked black walls. Then it all swam away as I fell headlong into Rosalie's childhood dream.

A South Louisiana village, built at the confluence of a hundred streams and rivulets. Streets of dirt and crushed oyster-shells, houses built on pilings to keep the water from lapping up onto the neat, brightly painted porches. Shrimp nets draped over railings, stiffening with salt, at some houses; crab traps stacked up to the roof at others. Cajun country.

(Hard Luck Rosalie a Cajun girl, she who claimed she had never set foot in Louisiana before! *Mon petite chou!* “Smith” indeed!)

On one porch a young girl dressed in a T-shirt and a home-sewn skirt of fresh calico perches on a case of empty beer bottles. The tender points of her breasts can be seen through the thin fabric of the T-shirt. A medallion gleams at the hollow of her throat, a tiny saint frozen in silver. She is perhaps twelve. It can only be her mama beside her, a large regal-faced woman with a crown of teased and fluffed black hair. The mama is peeling crawfish. She saves the heads in a coffee can and throws the other pickings to some speckled chickens scratching in the part of the dirt yard that is not flooded. The water is as high as Mama has ever seen it. The young girl has a can of Coca Cola, but she hasn’t drunk much of it. She is worried about something: it can be seen in the slump of her shoulders, in the sprawl of her thin legs beneath the calico skirt. Several times her eyes shimmer with tears she is just able to control. When she looks up, it becomes clear that she is older than she appeared at first, thirteen or fourteen. An air of naiveté, an awkwardness of limb and gesture, makes her seem younger. She fidgets and at last says, “Mama?”

“What is it, Rosie?” The mother’s voice seems a beat too slow; it catches in her throat and drags itself reluctantly out past her lips.

“Mama—is Theophile still under the ground?”

(There is a gap in the dream here, or rather in my awareness of it. I do not know who Theophile is—a childhood friend perhaps. More likely a brother; in a Cajun family there is no such thing as an only child. The question disturbs me, and I feel Rosalie slipping from me momentarily. Then the dream continues, inexorable, and I am pulled back in.)

Mama struggles to remain calm. Her shoulders bow and her heavy breasts sag against her belly. The stoic expression on her face crumbles a little. “No, Rosie,” she says at last. “Theophile’s grave is empty. He’s gone up to Heaven, him.”

“Then he wouldn’t be there if I looked?”

(All at once I am able to recognize my Rosalie in the face of this blossoming girl. The intelligent dark eyes, the quick mind behind them undulled by whiskey and time.)

Mama is silent, searching for an answer that will both satisfy and comfort. But a bayou storm has been blowing up, and it arrives suddenly, as they will: thunder rolls across the sky, the air is suddenly alive with

invisible sparks. Then the rain comes down in a solid torrent. The speckled chickens scramble under the porch, complaining. Within seconds the yard in front of the house is a sea of mud. It has rained like this every day for a month. It is the wettest spring anyone has ever seen in this part of the bayou.

"You ain't goin' anywhere in this flood," Mama says. The relief is evident in her voice. She shoos the girl inside and hurries around the house to take washing off the line, though the faded cotton dresses and patched denim trousers are already soaked through.

Inside the warm little house, Rosalie sits at the kitchen window watching rain hammer down on the bayou, and she wonders.

The storm lasts all night. Lying in her bed, Rosalie hears the rain on the roof; she hears branches creaking and lashing in the wind. But she is used to thunderstorms, and she pays no attention to this one. She is thinking of a shed in the side yard, where her father's old crab traps and tools are kept. She knows there is a shovel in there. She knows where the key is.

The storm ends an hour before dawn, and she is ready.

It is her own death she is worried about, of course, not that of Theophile (whoever he may be). She is at the age where her curiosity about the weakness of the flesh outweighs her fear of it. She thinks of him under the ground and she has to know whether he is really there. Has he ascended to Heaven or is he still in his grave, rotting? Whatever she finds, it cannot be worse than the thing she has imagined.

(So I think at the time.)

Rosalie is not feeling entirely sane as she eases out of the silent house, filches her father's shovel, and creeps through the dark village to the graveyard. She likes to go barefoot, and the soles of her feet are hard enough to walk over the broken edges of the glittering wet oyster-shells, but she knows you have to wear shoes after a heavy rain or worms might eat their way into your feet. So she slogs through the mud in her soaked sneakers, refusing to think about what she is going to do.

It is still too dark to see, but Rosalie knows her way by heart through these village streets. Soon her hand finds the rusty iron gate of the graveyard, and it ratchets open at her touch. She winces at the harsh sound in the predawn silence, but there is no one around to hear.

At least, no one who can hear.

The crude silhouettes of headstones stab into the inky sky. Few families in the village can afford a carved marker; they lash two sticks together in the shape of a rough cross, or they hew their own stone out of granite if they can get a piece. Rosalie feels her way through a forest of jagged, irregular memorials to the dead. She knows some of them are only hand-lettered oak boards wedged into the ground. The shadows at the base of each marker are wet, shimmering. Foul mud sucks at her feet. She tells herself the smell is only stagnant water. In places the ground feels slick and lumpy; she cannot see what she is stepping on.

But when she comes near the stone she seeks, she can see it. For it is the finest stone in the graveyard, carved of moon-pale marble that seems to pull all light into its milky depths. His family had it made in New Orleans, spending what was probably their life's savings. The chiseled letters are as concise as razor cuts. Rosalie cannot see them, but she knows their every crevice and shadow. Only his name, stark and cold; no dates, no inscriptions, as if the family's grief was so great that they could not bear to say anything about him. Just inscribe it with his name and leave him there.

The plot of earth at the base of the stone is not visible, but she knows it all too well, a barren, muddy rectangle. There has been no time for grass or weeds to grow upon it; he has only been buried a fortnight, and the few sprouts that tried to come up have been beaten back down by the rain. But can he really be under there, shut up in a box, his lithe body bloating and bursting, his wonderful face and hands beginning to decay?

Rosalie steps forward, hand extended to touch the letters of his name: THEOPHILE THIBODEAUX. As she thinks—or dreams—the name, her fingers poised to trace its marble contours, an image fills her head, a jumble of sensations intense and erotic. A boy older than Rosalie, perhaps seventeen: a sharp pale face, too thin to be called handsome, but surely compelling; a curtain of long sleek black hair half-hiding eyes of fierce, burning azure. Theophile!

(All at once it is as if Rosalie's consciousness has merged completely with mine. My heart twists with a young girl's love and lust for this spitfire Cajun boy. I am dimly aware of Rosalie's drunken twenty-year-old body asleep on her bed, her feminine viscera twitching at the memory of him. O, how he touched her—O, how he tasted her!)

She had known it was wrong in the eyes of God. Her mama had raised her to be a good girl. But the evenings she had spent with Theophile after

dances and church socials, sitting on an empty dock with his arm around her shoulders, leaning into the warm hollow of his chest—that could not be wrong. After a week of knowing her he had begun to show her the things he wrote on his ink-blackened relic of an Olympia typewriter, poems and stories, songs of the swamp. And that could not be wrong.

And the night they had sneaked out of their houses to meet, the night in the empty boathouse near Theophile's home—that could not be wrong either. They had begun only kissing, but the kisses grew too hot, too wild—Rosalie felt her insides boiling. Theophile answered her heat with his own. She felt him lifting the hem of her skirt and—carefully, almost reverently—sliding off her cotton panties. Then he was stroking the dark down between her legs, teasing her with the very tips of his fingers, rubbing faster and deeper until she felt like a blossom about to burst with sweet nectar. Then he parted her legs wider and bent to kiss her there as tenderly as he had kissed her mouth. His tongue was soft yet rough, like a soapy washcloth, and Rosalie had thought her young body would die with the pleasure of it. Then, slowly, Theophile was easing himself into her, and yes, she wanted him there, and yes, she was clutching at his back, pulling him farther in, refusing to heed the sharp pain of first entry. He rested inside her, barely moving; he lowered his head to kiss her sore developing nipples, and Rosalie felt the power of all womanhood shudder through her. This could not be wrong.

With the memories fixed firmly in her mind she takes another step toward his headstone. The ground crumbles away beneath her feet, and she falls headlong into her lover's grave.

The shovel whacks her across the spine. The rotten smell billows around her, heavy and ripe: spoiling meat, rancid fat, a sweetish-sickly odor. The fall stuns her. She struggles in the gritty muck, spits it out of her mouth.

Then the first pale light of dawn breaks across the sky, and Rosalie stares into the ruined face of Theophile.

(Now her memories flooded over me like the tide. Some time after they had started meeting in the boathouse she began to feel sick all the time; the heat made her listless. Her monthly blood, which had been coming for only a year, stopped. Mama took her into the next town to see a doctor, and he confirmed what Rosalie had already dreaded: she was going to have Theophile's baby.)

Her papa was not a hard man, nor cruel. But he had been raised in the bosom of the Church, and he had learned to measure his own worth by the honor of his family. Theophile never knew his Rosalie was pregnant. Rosalie's father waited for him in the boathouse one night. He stepped in holding a new sheaf of poems, and Papa's deer shot caught him across the chest and belly, a hundred tiny black eyes weeping red tears.

Papa was locked up in the county jail now and Mama said that soon he would go someplace even worse, someplace where they could never see him again. Mama said it wasn't Rosalie's fault, but Rosalie could see in her eyes that it was.

It has been the wettest spring anyone can remember, a month of steady rains. The water table in Louisiana bayou country is already so high that a hole will begin to draw water at a depth of two feet or less. All this spring the table has risen steadily, soaking the ground, drowning grass and flowers, making a morass of the sweet swamp earth. Cattails have sprung up at the edge of the graveyard. But the storm last night pushed the groundwater to saturation point and beyond. The wealthy folk of New Orleans bury their dead in vaults above ground to protect them from this very danger. But no one here can afford a marble vault, or even a brick one.

And the village graveyard has flooded at last.

Some of the things that have floated to the surface are little more than bone. Others are swollen to three or four times their size, gassy mounds of decomposed flesh rising like islands from the mud; some of these have silk flower petals stuck to them like obscene decorations. Flies rise lazily, then descend again in glittering, circling clouds. Here are mired the warped boards of coffins split open by the water's relentless pull. There floats the plaster figurine of a saint, his face and the color of his robes washed away by rain. Yawning eyeless faces thrust out of stagnant pools, seeming to gasp for breath. Rotting hands unfold like blighted tiger lilies. Every drop of water, every inch of earth in the graveyard is foul with the effluvium of the dead.

But Rosalie can only see the face thrust into hers, the body crushed beneath her own. Theophile's eyes have fallen back into their sockets and his mouth is open; his tongue is gone. She sees thin white worms teeming in the passage of his throat. His nostrils are widening black holes beginning to encroach upon the greenish flesh of his cheeks. His sleek hair is almost gone; the few strands left are thin and scummy, nibbled by waterbugs.

(Sitting on the dock, Rosalie and Theophile used to spit into the water and watch the shiny black beetles swarm around the white gobs; Theophile had told her they would eat hair and toenails too.) In places she can see the glistening dome of his skull. *The skull behind the dear face; the skull that cradled the thoughts and dreams…*

She thinks of the shovel she brought and wonders what she meant to do with it. Did she *want* to see Theophile like this? Or had she really expected to find his grave empty, his fine young body gone fresh and whole to God?

No. She had only wanted to know where he was. Because she had nothing left of him—his family would give her no poems, no lock of hair. And now she had even lost his seed.

(The dogs ran Papa to earth in the swamp where he had hidden and the men dragged him off to jail. As they led him toward the police car, Theophile's mother ran up to him and spat in his face. Papa was handcuffed and could not wipe himself; he only stood there with the sour spit of sorrow running down his cheeks, and his eyes looked confused, as if he was unsure just what he had done.

Mama made Rosalie sleep in bed with her that night. But when Rosalie woke up the next morning Mama was gone; there was only a note saying she would be back before sundown. Sure enough, she straggled in with the afternoon's last light. She had spent the whole day in the swamp. Her face was scratched and sweaty, the cuffs of her jeans caked with mud.

Mama had brought back a basketful of herbs. She didn't fix dinner, but instead spent the evening boiling the plants down to a thin syrup. They exuded a bitter, stinging scent as they cooked. The potion sat cooling until the next night. Then Mama made Rosalie drink it all down.

It was the worst pain she had ever felt. She thought her intestines and her womb and the bones of her pelvis were being wrung in a giant merciless fist. When the bleeding started she thought her very insides were dissolving. There were thick clots and ragged shreds of tissue in the blood.

"It won't damage you," Mama told her, "and it will be over by morning."

True to Mama's word, just before dawn Rosalie felt something solid being squeezed out of her. She knew she was losing the last of Theophile.

She tried to clamp the walls of her vagina around it, to keep him inside her as long as she could. But the thing was slick and formless, and it slid easily onto the towel Mama had spread between her legs. Mama gathered the towel up quickly and would not let Rosalie see what was inside.

Rosalie heard the toilet flush once, then twice. Her womb and the muscles of her abdomen felt as if they had gone through Mama's kitchen grater. But the pain was nothing compared to the emptiness she felt in her heart.)

The sky is growing lighter, showing her more of the graveyard around her: the corpses borne on the rising water, the maggot-ridden mud. Theophile's face yawns into hers. Rosalie struggles against him and feels his sodden flesh give beneath her weight. She is beyond recognizing her love now. She is frantic; she fights him. Her hand strikes his belly and punches in up to the wrist.

Then suddenly Theophile's body opens like a flower made of carrion, and she sinks into him. Her elbows are trapped in the brittle cage of his ribs. Her face is pressed into the bitter soup of his organs. Rosalie whips her head to one side. Her face is a mask of putrescence. It is in her hair, her nostrils; it films her eyes. She is drowning in the body that once gave her sustenance. She opens her mouth to scream and feels things squirming in between her teeth.

"My *cherie* Rosalie," she hears the voice of her lover whispering.

And then the rain pours down again.

Unpleasant.

I tore myself screaming from Rosalie—screaming silently, unwilling to wake her. In that instant I was afraid of her for what she had gone through; I dreaded to see her eyes snap open like a doll's, meeting me full in the face.

But Rosalie was only sleeping a troubled slumber. She muttered fitful disjointed words; there was a cold sheen of sweat on her brow; she exuded a flowery, powerful smell of sex. I hovered at the edge of the bed and studied her ringed hands clenched into small fists, her darting, jumping eyelids still stained with yesterday's makeup. I could only imagine the ensuing years and torments that had brought that little girl to this night, to this room. That had made her want to wear the false trappings of death, after having wallowed in the truth of it.

But I *knew* how difficult it would be to talk these memories out of her. There could be no consolation and no compensation for a past so cruel. No treasure, no matter how valuable, could matter in the face of such lurid terror.

So I assure you that the thing I did next was done out of pure mercy—not a desire for personal gain, or control over Rosalie. I had never done such a thing to her before. She was my friend; I wished to deliver her from the poison of her memories. It was as simple as that.

I gathered up my courage and I went back into Rosalie's head. Back in through her eyes and the whorled tunnels of her ears, back into the spongy electric forest of her brain.

I cannot be more scientific than this: I found the connections that made the memory. I searched out the nerves and subtle acids that composed the dream, the morsels of Rosalie's brain that still held a residue of Theophile, the cells that were blighted by his death.

And I erased it all.

I pitied Theophile. Truly I did. There is no existence more lonely than death, especially a death where no one is left to mourn you.

But Rosalie belonged to me know.

I had her rent a boat.

It was easy for her to learn how to drive it: boating is in the Cajun blood. We made an exploratory jaunt or two down through Barataria—where two tiny hamlets, much like Rosalie's home village, both bore my name—and I regaled a fascinated Rosalie with tales of burials at sea, of shallow bayou graves, of a rascal whose empty eye sockets dripped with Spanish moss.

When I judged her ready, I guided her to a spot I remembered well, a clearing where five enormous oaks grew from one immense, twisted trunk. The five sentinels, we called them in my day. The wind soughed in the upper branches. The swamp around us was hushed, expectant.

After an hour of digging, Rosalie's shiny new shovel unearthed the lid and upper portion of a great iron chest. Her brittle hair was stringy with sweat. Her black lace dress was caked with mud and clay. Her face had gone paler than usual with exertion; in the half-light of the swamp it was

almost luminescent. She had never looked so beautiful to me as she did at that moment.

She stared at me. Her tired eyes glittered as if with fever.

“Open it,” I urged.

Rosalie swung the shovel at the heart-shaped hasp of the chest and knocked it loose on the first try. Once more and it fell away in a shower of soggy rust. She glanced back at me once more—looking for what, I wonder; seeing what?—and then heaved open the heavy lid.

And the sixth sentinel sat up to greet her.

I always took an extra man along when I went into the swamp to bury treasure. One I didn’t trust, or didn’t need. He and my reliable henchmen would dig the hole and drag the chest to the edge of it, ready to heave in. Then I would gaze deep into the eyes of each man and ask, in a voice both quiet and compelling, “Who wishes to guard my treasure?” My men knew the routine, and were silent. The extra man—currying favor as the useless and unreliable will do—always volunteered.

Then my top lieutenant would take three steps forward and put a ball in the lowly one’s brain. His corpse was laid tenderly in the chest, his blood seeping into the mounds of gold or silver or glittering jewels, and I would tuck in one of my mojo bags, the ones I had specially made in New Orleans. Then the chest was sunk in the mire of the swamp, and my man, now rendered trustworthy, was left to guard my treasure until I should need it.

I was the only one who could open those chests. The combined magic of the mojo bag and the anger of the betrayed man’s spirit saw to that.

My sixth sentinel wrapped skeletal arms around Rosalie’s neck and drew her down. His jaws yawned wide and I saw teeth, still hungry after two hundred years, clamp down on her throat.

A mist of blood hung in the air; from the chest there was a ripping sound, then a noise of quick, choking agony. I hoped he would not make it too painful for her. After all, she was the woman I had chosen to spend eternity with.

I had told Rosalie that she would never again have to wriggle out of flimsy costumes under the eyes of slobbering men, and I had not lied. I had told her she would never have to worry about money anymore, and I had not lied. What I had neglected to tell her was that I did not wish to share my treasures—I only wanted her dead, my Hard Luck Rosalie, free from this

world that pained her so, free to wander with me through the unspoiled swamps and bayous, through the ancient buildings of a city mired in time.

Soon Rosalie’s spirit left her body and flew to me. It had nowhere else to go. I felt her struggling furiously against my love, but she would give in soon. I had no shortage of time to convince her.

I slipped my arm around Rosalie’s neck and planted a kiss on her ectoplasmic lips. Then I clasped her wisp of a hand in mine, and we disappeared together.

HIS MOUTH WILL TASTE OF WORMWOOD

“To the treasures and the pleasures of the grave,” said my friend Louis, and raised his goblet of absinthe to me in drunken benediction.

“To the funeral lilies,” I replied, “and to the calm pale bones.” I drank deeply from my own glass. The absinthe cauterized my throat with its flavor, part pepper, part licorice, part rot. It had been one of our greatest finds: more than fifty bottles of the now-outlawed liqueur, sealed up in a New Orleans family tomb. Transporting them was a nuisance, but once we had learned to enjoy the taste of wormwood, our continued drunkenness was ensured for a long, long time. We had taken the skull of the crypt’s patriarch, too, and it now resided in a velvet-lined enclave in our museum.

Louis and I, you see, were dreamers of a dark and restless sort. We met in our second year of college and quickly found that we shared one vital trait: both of us were dissatisfied with everything. We drank straight whiskey and declared it too weak. We took strange drugs, but the visions they brought us were of emptiness, mindlessness, slow decay. The books we read were dull; the artists who sold their colorful drawings on the street were mere hacks in our eyes; the music we heard was never loud enough, never harsh enough to stir us. We were truly jaded, we told one another. For all the impression the world made upon us, our eyes might have been dead black holes in our heads.

For a time we thought our salvation lay in the sorcery wrought by music. We studied recordings of weird nameless dissonances, attended performances of obscure bands at ill-lit filthy clubs. But music did not save us. For a time we distracted ourselves with carnality. We explored the damp alien territory between the legs of any girl who would have us, sometimes separately, sometimes both of us in bed together with one girl or more. We bound their wrists and ankles with black lace, we lubricated and penetrated their every orifice, we shamed them with their own pleasures. I recall a mauve-haired beauty, Felicia, who was brought to wild sobbing orgasm by

the rough tongue of a stray dog we trapped. We watched her from across the room, drug-dazed and unstirred.

When we had exhausted the possibilities of women we sought those of our own sex, craving the androgynous curve of a boy's cheekbone, the molten flood of ejaculation invading our mouths. Eventually we turned to one another, seeking the thresholds of pain and ecstasy no one else had been able to help us attain. Louis asked me to grow my nails long and file them into needle-sharp points. When I raked them down his back, tiny beads of blood welled up in the angry tracks they left. He loved to lie still, pretending to submit to me, as I licked the salty blood away. Afterward he would push me down and attack me with his mouth, his tongue seeming to sear a trail of liquid fire into my skin.

But sex did not save us either. We shut ourselves in our room and saw no one for days on end. At last we withdrew to the seclusion of Louis's ancestral home near Baton Rouge. Both his parents were dead—a suicide pact, Louis hinted, or perhaps a suicide and a murder. Louis, the only child, retained the family home and fortune. Built on the edge of a vast swamp, the plantation house loomed sepulchrally out of the gloom that surrounded it always, even in the middle of a summer afternoon. Oaks of primordial hugeness grew in a canopy over the house, their branches like black arms fraught with Spanish moss. The moss was everywhere, reminding me of brittle gray hair, stirring wraithlike in the dank breeze from the swamp. I had the impression that, left too long unchecked, the moss might begin to grow from the ornate window-frames and fluted columns of the house itself.

The place was deserted save for us. The air was heady with the luminous scent of magnolias and the fetor of swamp gas. At night we sat on the veranda and sipped bottles of wine from the family cellar, gazing through an increasingly alcoholic mist at the will-o'-the-wisps that beckoned far off in the swamp. Obsessively we talked of new thrills and how we might get them. Louis's wit sparkled liveliest when he was bored, and on the night he first mentioned grave robbing, I laughed. I could not imagine that he was serious.

"What would we do with a bunch of dried-up old remains? Grind them to make a voodoo potion? I preferred your idea of increasing our tolerance to various poisons."

Louis's sharp face snapped toward me. His eyes were painfully sensitive to light, so that even in this gloaming he wore tinted glasses and it was impossible to see his expression. He kept his fair hair clipped very short, so that it stood up in crazy tufts when he raked a nervous hand through it. "No, Howard. Think of it: our own collection of death. A catalogue of pain, of human frailty—all for us. Set against a backdrop of tranquil loveliness. Think what it would be to walk through such a place, meditating, reflecting upon your own ephemeral essence. Think of making love in a charnel-house! We have only to assemble the parts—they will create a whole into which we may fall."

(Louis enjoyed speaking in cryptic puns; anagrams and palindromes, too, and any sort of puzzle appealed to him. I wonder whether that was not the root of his determination to look into the fathomless eye of death and master it. Perhaps he saw the mortality of the flesh as a gigantic jigsaw or crossword which, if he fitted all the parts into place, he might solve and thus defeat. Louis would have loved to live forever, though he would never have known what to do with all his time.)

He soon produced his hashish pipe to sweeten the taste of the wine, and we spoke no more of grave robbing that night. But the thought preyed upon me in the languorous weeks to come. The smell of a freshly opened grave, I thought, must in its way be as intoxicating as the perfume of the swamp or a girl's most intimate sweat. Could we truly assemble a collection of the grave's treasures that would be lovely to look upon, that would soothe our fevered souls?

The caresses of Louis's tongue grew languid. Sometimes, instead of nestling with me between the black satin sheets of our bed, he would sleep on a torn blanket in one of the underground rooms. These had originally been built for indeterminate but always intriguing purposes—abolitionist meetings had taken place there, Louis told me, and a weekend of free love, and an earnest but wildly incompetent Black Mass replete with a vestal virgin and phallic candles.

These rooms were where our museum would be set up. At last I came to agree with Louis that only the plundering of graves might cure us of the most stifling ennui we had yet suffered. I could not bear to watch his tormented sleep, the pallor of his hollow cheeks, the delicate bruise-like darkening of the skin beneath his flickering eyes. Besides, the notion of grave robbing had begun to entice me. In ultimate corruption, might we not

find the path to ultimate salvation? Our first grizzly prize was the head of Louis's mother, rotten as a pumpkin forgotten on the vine, half-shattered by two bullets from an antique Civil War revolver. We took it from the family crypt by the light of a full moon. The will-o'-the-wisps glowed weakly, like dying beacons on some unattainable shore, as we crept back to the manse. I dragged pick and shovel behind me; Louis carried the putrescent trophy tucked beneath his arm. After we had descended into the museum, I lit three candles scented with the russet spices of autumn (the season when Louis's parents had died) while Louis placed the head in the alcove we had prepared for it. I thought I detected a certain tenderness in his manner. "May she give us the family blessing," he murmured, absently wiping on the lapel of his jacket a few shreds of pulpy flesh that had adhered to his fingers.

We spent a happy time refurbishing the museum, polishing the inlaid precious metals of the wall fixtures, brushing away the dust that frosted the velvet designs of the wallpaper, alternately burning incense and charring bits of cloth we had saturated with our blood, in order to give the rooms the odor we desired—a charnel perfume strong enough to drive us to frenzy. We travelled far in our collections, but always we returned home with crates full of things no man had ever been meant to possess. We heard of a girl with violet eyes who died in some distant town; not seven days later we had those eyes in an ornate cut-glass jar, pickled in formaldehyde. We scraped bone dust and nitre from the bottoms of ancient coffins; we stole the barely withered heads and hands of children fresh in their graves, with their soft little fingers and their lips like flower petals. We had baubles and precious heirlooms, vermiculated prayer books and shrouds encrusted with mold. I had not taken seriously Louis's talk of making love in a charnel-house—but neither had I reckoned on the pleasure he could inflict with a femur dipped in rose-scented oil.

Upon the night I speak of—the night we drank our toast to the grave and its riches—we had just acquired our finest prize yet. Later in the evening we planned a celebratory debauch at a nightclub in the city. We had returned from our most recent travels not with the usual assortment of sacks and crates, but with only one small box carefully wrapped and tucked into Louis's breast pocket. The box contained an object whose existence we had only speculated upon previously. From certain half-articulate mutterings of an old blind man plied with cheap liquor in a French Quarter bar, we traced

rumors of a certain fetish or charm to a Negro graveyard in the southern bayou country. The fetish was said to be a thing of eerie beauty, capable of luring any lover to one's bed, hexing any enemy to a sick and painful death, and (this, I think, was what intrigued Louis the most) turning back tenfold on anyone who used it with less than the touch of a master.

A heavy mist hung low over the graveyard when we arrived there, lapping at our ankles, pooling around the markers of wood and stone, abruptly melting away in patches to reveal a gnarled root or a patch of blackened grass, then closing back in. By the light of a waning moon, we made our way along a path overgrown with rioting weeds. The graves were decorated with elaborate mosaics of broken glass, coins, bottle caps, oyster shells lacquered silver and gold. Some mounds were outlined by empty bottles shoved neck-downward into the earth. I saw a lone plaster saint whose features had been worn away by years of wind and rain. I kicked half-buried rusty cans that had once held flowers; now they held only bare brittle stems and pestilent rainwater, or nothing at all. Only the scent of wild spider lilies pervaded the night.

The earth in one corner of the graveyard seemed blacker than the rest. The grave we sought was marked only by a crude cross of charred and twisted wood. We were skilled at the art of violating the dead; soon we had the coffin uncovered. The boards were warped by years of burial in wet, foul earth. Louis pried up the lid with his spade and, by the moon's meager and watery light, we gazed upon what lay within.

Of the inhabitant we knew almost nothing. Some said a hideously disfigured old conjure woman lay buried here. Some said she was a young girl with a face as lovely and cold as moonlight on water, and a soul crueler than Fate itself. Some claimed the body was not a woman's at all, but that of a white voodoo priest who had ruled the bayou. He had features of a cool, unearthly beauty, they said, and a stock of fetishes and potions which he would hand out with the kindest blessing…or the direst curse. This was the story Louis and I liked best; the sorcerer's capriciousness appealed to us, and the fact that he was beautiful.

No trace of beauty remained to the thing in the coffin—at least not the sort of beauty that a healthy eye might cherish. Louis and I loved the translucent parchment skin stretched tight over long bones that seemed to have been carved from ivory. The delicate brittle hands folded across the sunken chest, the soft black caverns of the eyes, the colorless strands of hair

that still clung to the fine white dome of the skull—to us these things were the poetry of death.

Louis played his flashlight over the withered cords of the neck. There, on a silver chain gone black with age, was the object we had come seeking. No crude wax doll or bit of dried root was this. Louis and I gazed at each other, moved by the beauty of the thing; then, as if in a dream, he reached to grasp it. This was our rightful night's prize, our plunder from a sorcerer's grave.

"How does it look?" Louis asked as we were dressing.

I never had to think about my clothes. On an evening such as this, when we were dressing to go out, I would choose the same garments I might wear for a night's digging in the graveyard—black, unornamented black, with only the whiteness of my face and hands showing against the backdrop of night. On a particularly festive occasion, such as this, I might smudge a bit of kohl round my eyes. The absence of color made me nearly invisible: if I walked with my shoulders hunched and my chin tucked down, no one except Louis would see me.

"Don't slouch so, Howard," said Louis irritably as I ducked past the mirror. "Turn around and look at me. Aren't I fine in my sorcerer's jewelry?"

Even when Louis wore black, he did it to be noticed. Tonight he was resplendent in narrow-legged trousers of purple paisley silk and a silvery jacket that seemed to turn all light iridescent. He had taken our prize out of its box and fastened it around his throat. As I came closer to look at it, I caught Louis's scent: rich and rather meaty, like blood kept too long in a stoppered bottle.

Against the sculpted hollow of Louis's throat, the thing on its chain seemed more strangely beautiful than ever. Have I neglected to describe the magical object, the voodoo fetish from the churned earth of the grave? I will never forget it. A polished sliver of bone (or a tooth, but what fang could have been so long, so sleekly honed, and still have somehow retained the look of a *human tooth?*) bound by a strip of copper. Set into the metal, a single ruby sparkled like a drop of gore against a verdigris. Etched in

exquisite miniature upon the sliver of bone, and darkened by the rubbing in of some black-red substance, was an elaborate veve—one of the symbols used by voodooists to invoke their pantheon of terrible gods. Whoever was buried in that lonely bayou grave, he had been no mere dabbler in swamp magic. Every cross and swirl of the veve was reproduced to perfection. I thought the thing still retained a trace of the grave's scent—a dark odor like potatoes long spoiled. Each grave has its own peculiar scent, just as each living body does.

"Are you certain you should wear it?" I asked.

"It will go into the museum tomorrow," he said, "with a scarlet candle burning eternally before it. Tonight its powers are mine."

The nightclub was in a part of the city that looked as if it had been gutted from the inside out by a righteous tongue of fire. The street was lit only by occasional scribbles of neon high overhead, advertisements for cheap hotels and all-night bars. Dark eyes stared at us from the crevices and pathways between buildings, disappearing only when Louis's hand crept toward the inner pocket of his jacket. He carried a small stiletto there, and knew how to use it for more than pleasure.

We slipped through a door at the end of an alley and descended the narrow staircase into the club. The lurid glow of a blue bulb flooded the stairs, making Louis's face look sunken and dead behind his tinted glasses. Feedback blasted us as we came in, and above it, a screaming battle of guitars. The inside of the club was a patchwork of flickering light and darkness. Graffiti covered the walls and the ceiling like a tangle of barbed wire come alive. I saw bands' insignia and jeering death's-heads, crucifixes bejeweled with broken glass and black obscenities writhing in the stroboscopic light.

Louis brought me a drink from the bar. I sipped it slowly, still drunk on absinthe. Since the music was too loud for conversation, I studied the club-goers around us. A quiet bunch, they were, staring fixedly at the stage as if they had been drugged (and no doubt many of them had—I remembered visiting a club one night on a dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, watching in fascination as the guitar strings seemed to drip soft viscera onto the stage). Younger than Louis and myself, most of them were, and queerly beautiful in their thrift shop rags, their leather and fishnet and cheap

costume jewelry, their pale faces and painted hair. Perhaps we would take one of them home with us tonight. We had done so before. “The delicious guttersnipes,” Louis called them. A particularly beautiful face, starkly boned and androgynous, flickered at the edge of my vision. When I looked, it was gone.

I went into the restroom. A pair of boys stood at a single urinal, talking animatedly. I stood at the sink rinsing my hands, watching the boys in the mirror and trying to overhear their conversation. A hairline fracture in the glass seemed to pull the taller boy’s eyes askew. “Casper and Alyssa found her tonight,” he said. “In some old warehouse by the river. I heard her skin was *gray*, man. And sort of withered, like something had sucked out most of the meat.”

“Far out,” said the other boy. His black-rimmed lips barely moved.

“She was only fifteen, you know?” said the tall boy as he zipped his ragged trousers.

“She was a cunt anyway.”

They turned away from the urinal and started talking about the band—Ritual Sacrifice, I gathered, whose name was scrawled on the walls of the club. As they went out, the boys glanced at the mirror and the tall one’s eyes met mine for an instant. Nose like a haughty Indian chief’s, eyelids smudged with black and silver. Louis would approve, I thought—but the night was young, and there were many drinks left to be had.

When the band took a break we visited the bar again. Louis edged in beside a thin dark-haired boy who was bare-chested except for a piece of torn lace tied about his throat. When he turned, I knew his was the androgynous and striking face I had glimpsed before. His beauty was almost feral, but overlaid with a cool elegance like a veneer of sanity hiding madness. His ivory skin stretched over cheekbones like razors; his eyes were hectic pools of darkness.

“I like your amulet,” he said to Louis. “It’s very unusual.”

“I have another one like it at home,” Louis told him.

“Really? I’d like to see them both together.” The boy paused to let Louis order our vodka gimlets, then said, “I thought there was only one.”

Louis’s back straightened like a string of beads being pulled taut. Behind his glasses, I knew, his pupils would have shrunk to pinpoints: the light pained him more when he was nervous. But no tremor in his voice betrayed him when he said, “What do you know about it?”

The boy shrugged. On his bony shoulders, the movement was insouciant and drop-dead graceful. “It’s voodoo,” he said. “I know what voodoo is. Do you?”

The implication stung, but Louis only bared his teeth the slightest bit; it might have been a smile. “I am *conversant* in all types of magic,” he said, “at least.”

The boy moved closer to Louis, so that their hips were almost touching, and lifted the amulet between thumb and forefinger. I thought I saw one long nail brush Louis’s throat, but I could not be sure. “I could tell you the meaning of this veve,” he said, “if you were certain you wished to know.”

“It symbolizes power,” Louis said. “All the power of my soul.” His voice was cold, but I saw his tongue dart out to moisten his lips. He was beginning to dislike this boy, and also to desire him.

“No,” said the boy so softly that I barely caught his words. He sounded almost sad. “This cross in the center is inverted, you see, and the line encircling it represents a serpent. A thing like this can trap your soul. Instead of being rewarded with eternal life…you might be doomed to it.”

“Doomed to eternal life?” Louis permitted himself a small cold smile. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The band is starting again. Find me after the show and I’ll tell you. We can have a drink…and you can tell me all you know about voodoo.” The boy threw back his head and laughed. Only then did I notice that one of his upper canine teeth was missing.

The next part of the evening remains a blur of moonlight and neon, ice cubes and blue swirling smoke and sweet drunkenness. The boy drank glass after glass of absinthe with us, seeming to relish the bitter taste. None of our other guests had liked the liqueur. “Where did you get it?” he asked. Louis was silent for a long moment before he said, “It was sent over from France.” Except for its single black gap, the boy’s smile would have been as perfect as the sharp-edged crescent moon.

“Another drink?” said Louis, refilling both our glasses.

When I next came to clarity, I was in the boy’s arms. I could not make out the words he was whispering; they might have been an incantation, if magic may be sung to pleasure’s music. A pair of hands cupped my face,

guiding my lips over the boy's pale parchment skin. They might have been Louis's hands. I knew nothing except this boy, the fragile movement of the bones beneath the skin, the taste of his spit bitter with wormwood.

I do not remember when he finally turned away from me and began lavishing his love upon Louis. I wish I could have watched, could have seen the lust bleeding into Louis's eyes, the pleasure wracking his body. For, as it turned out, the boy loved Louis so much more thoroughly than ever he loved me.

When I awoke, the bass thump of my pulse echoing through my skull blotted out all other sensations. Gradually, though, I became aware of tangled silk sheets, of hot sunlight on my face. Not until I came fully awake did I see the thing I had cradled like a lover all through the night.

For an instant two realities shifted in uneasy juxtaposition and almost merged. I was in Louis's bed; I recognized the feel of the sheets, their odor of silk and sweat. But this thing I held—this was surely one of the fragile mummies we had dragged out of their graves, the things we dissected for our museum. It took me only a moment, though, to recognize the familiar ruined features—the sharp chin, the high elegant brow. Something had desiccated Louis, had drained him of every drop of his moisture, his vitality. His skin crackled and flaked away beneath my fingers. His hair stuck to my lips, dry and colorless. The amulet, which had still been around his throat in bed last night, was gone.

The boy had left no trace—or so I thought until I saw a nearly transparent thing at the foot of the bed. It was like a quantity of spiderweb, or a damp and insubstantial veil. I picked it up and shook it out, but could not see its features until I held it up to the window. The thing was vaguely human-shaped, with empty limbs trailing off into nearly invisible tatters. As the thing wafted and billowed, I saw part of a face in it—the sharp curve left by a cheekbone, the hole where an eye had been—as if a face were imprinted upon gauze.

I carried Louis's brittle shell of a corpse down into the museum. Laying him before his mother's niche, I left a stick of incense burning in his folded hands and a pillow of black silk cradling the papery dry bulb of his skull. He would have wished it thus.

The boy has not come to me again, though I leave the window open every night. I have been back to the club, where I stand sipping vodka and watching the crowd. I have seen many beauties, many strange wasted faces,

but not the one I seek. I think I know where I will find him. Perhaps he still desires me—I must know.

I will go again to the lonely graveyard in the bayou. Once more—alone, this time—I will find the unmarked grave and plant my spade in its black earth. When I open the coffin—I know it, I am sure of it!—I will find not the mouldering thing we beheld before, but the calm beauty of replenished youth. The youth he drank from Louis. His face will be a scrimshaw mask of tranquility. The amulet—I know it; I am sure of it—will be around his neck.

Dying: the final shock of pain or nothingness that is the price we pay for everything. Could it not be the sweetest thrill, the only salvation we can attain…the only true moment of self-knowledge? The dark pools of his eyes will open, still and deep enough to drown in. He will hold out his arms to me, inviting me to lie down with him in his rich wormy bed.

With the first kiss his mouth will taste of wormwood. After that it will taste only of me—of my blood, my life, siphoning out of my body and into his. I will feel the sensations Louis felt: the shrivelling of my tissues, the drying-up of all my vital juices. I care not. The treasures and the pleasures of the grave? They are his hands, his lips, his tongue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Billy Martin (born Melissa Ann Brite; New Orleans May 25, 1967), known professionally as Poppy Z. Brite, is an American author best known for writing gothic and horror novels and short stories. Some of Martin's better known novels include *Lost Souls* (1992), *Drawing Blood* (1993), and the controversial serial killer novel *Exquisite Corpse* (1996); he has also released the short fiction collections *Wormwood* (originally published as *Swamp Foetus*; 1993), *Are You Loathsome Tonight?* (also published as *Self-Made Man*; 1998), *Wrong Things (*with Caitlin R. Kiernan; 2001), and *The Devil You Know* (2003). His "Calcutta: Lord of Nerves" was selected to represent the year 1992 in the story anthology *The Century's Best Horror Fiction*.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Martin moved away from horror fiction and gothic themes while still writing about gay characters. The critically acclaimed Liquor novels—*Liquor* (2004), *Prime* (2005), and *Soul Kitchen* (2006)—are dark comedies set in the New Orleans restaurant world. *The Value of X* (2002) depicts the beginning of the careers of the protagonists of the Liquor series—Gary "G-Man" Stubbs and John "Rickey" Rickey.

Film & TV Adaptations: "The Sixth Sentinel" *(*filmed as "The Dream Sentinel"), episode 209 of *The Hunger* (anthology series), Showtime. First aired September 10, 1999.

His works have been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Greek, Finnish, and Portuguese. Independent Legions Publishing translated into Italian, for the first time, his story "Calcutta Lord of Nerves" ("Calcutta, Signora delle Impudenze," *I Sogni del Diavolo*, 2015) and "Self-Made Man" ("Risvegli," *Danze Eretiche* – Volume 1, 2015).

Major Awards

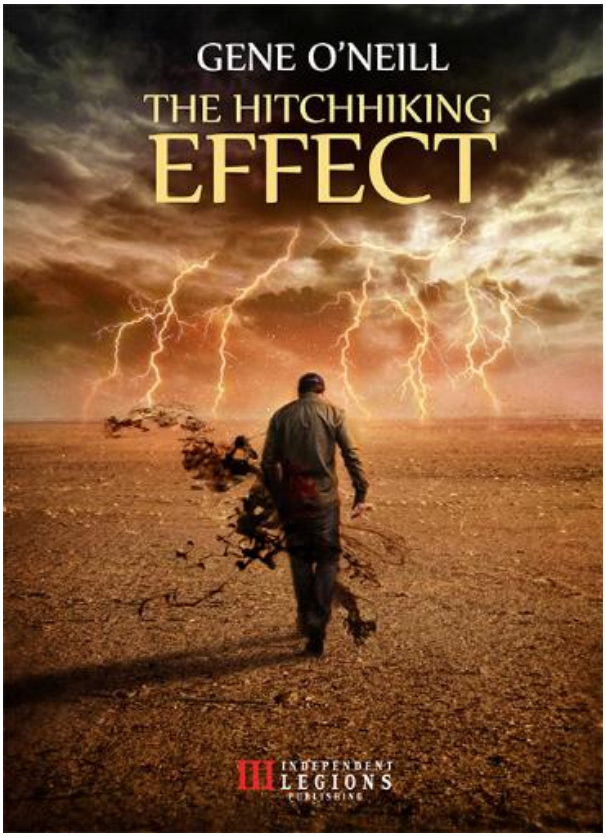
World Fantasy Awards
1995: *Love in Vein* (HarperPrism) nomination (anthology)
1994: *Drawing Blood* (Delacorte Abyss) nomination (novel)
1993: “Calcutta, Lord of Nerves” (*Still Dead*) nomination (short story)

Bram Stoker Awards
1997: *Exquisite Corpse* (Simon & Schuster) nomination (novel)
1994: *Drawing Blood* (Delacorte Abyss) nomination (novel)
1993: *Lost Souls* (Delacorte Abyss) nomination (first novel)
1992: “The Ash of Memory, the Dust of Desire” (*Dead End: City Limits*) nomination (short story)

Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire
1998: “Calcutta, Lord of Nerves” (“Calcutta, seigneur des nerfs”) winner (translated short story)

International Horror Guild Awards
1995: *Love in Vein* (HarperPrism) winner (anthology)

Coming Soon (in English)



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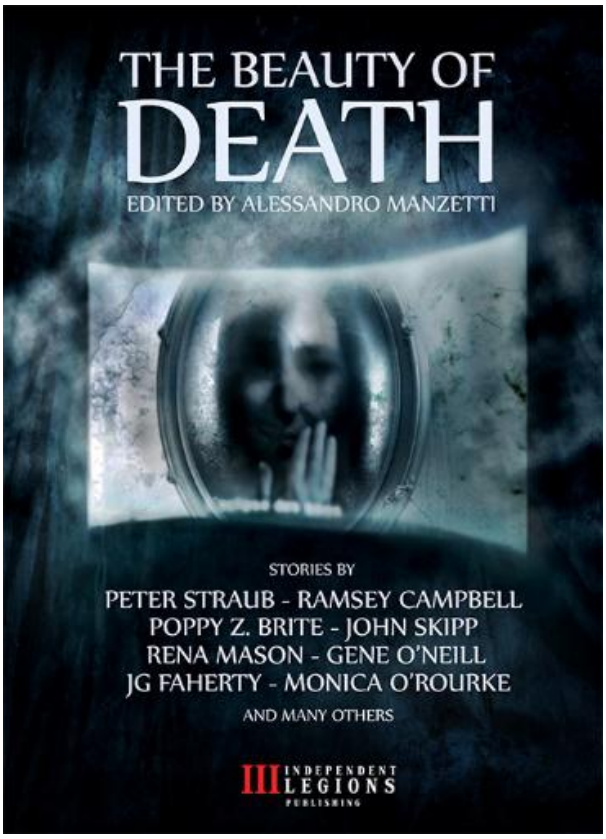

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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